

# Mother Nature Strikes Back!

Everyone knows how stormy this spring has been, though thankfully nothing like what occurred in Eagle Pass a week or so ago, or in Kansas this past weekend, has happened here. I hope it's immediately evident to all that, as the old TV commercial said, "It's not nice to fool with Mother Nature." Whether it's a bee buzzing around your face, an asp caterpillar, a patch of poison ivy, a snake in the grass, or a really strong storm, we need to take nature seriously.

Storm damage at the Biology Station has been confined to a few trees, probably the most dramatic of which is our new "lightning-struck-pine" that we now get to show off to visitors. On Monday, March 26<sup>th</sup>, while I was in Austin telling the Austin Butterfly Forum folks about my upcoming field guide project, Pat and the pooches were scared out of their wits when lightning struck a 60 foot pine less than twice that distance from the residence house. The particular pine is interesting because it splits into two trunks about 10 feet above the ground and is right beside the entrance drive.

I cored a similar-sized tree across the drive that died a few years ago—a casualty of ice storms and pine bark beetles—with three separate increment bores and estimated that it was 75 years old, so the lightning-struck pine is no young tree. Intriguingly, the lightning struck one side of the split trunk, spiraled down that trunk going completely around it at least twice, then jumped the gap where the two trunks split to finish its spiral into the ground on the other side of the tree.



*The damage at the base of a lightning-struck Loblolly Pine is dramatic evidence that we need to take precautions when strong weather comes a-calling.*

The strike probably traveled down some of the water conducting tissue in the living layer (the cambium) of the tree to ground and the strike evidence would suggest that these water conducting cells spiral around the tree. It blew the bark off of the tree, about 6" wide, leaving a glaringly white spiral line that's more than twice the height of the tree, and left strips of the living tree dangling on the myrtle and yaupon shrubs at the base.

The charge split one final time as it neared ground, leaving parallel grooves in the bark, and finally dug a hole at least 15 inches deep at the base of the main branch. It's a pretty impressive sight. I can tell you and it took me a few tries to put the whole story together. I wondered what kind of insect could cause such damage until Pat told me about the "thunderbolt" that set her hearing aids to feeding back until she could take them out and reset them. Yep, 2 + 2 does still equal 4.

Last week's storms, too, took down a 50 foot pine which—wonders of wonders—actually fell into the meadow and not on the fence. It's mighty impressive in its own way—the tree broke about 8 feet above the ground and the jagged ends of the stump and the partially broken trunk on its side provide ready evidence of the power of that wind gust.

I have little doubt that I will find some trees down on the fence when I finally get out to walk the perimeter fence. To quote the late-great Rodney Dangerfield, dressed as Mother Nature: "I don't get no respect, no respect at all!"