

## WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

### SPANISH MOSS



Spanish Moss is one of the most iconic, symbolic images of the southeastern United States. Drooping gracefully from the limbs of live oaks and cypress trees, the plant is one of the trademarks of our region. Yet it is also the subject of many misconceptions. First of all, it is neither Spanish nor a moss. It is native to the humid southeastern states, the Caribbean, and tropical America. And it's a true flowering plant in the bromeliad, or pineapple, family — not a moss.

Spanish Moss grows as an epiphyte, or “air plant”, on the limbs of trees, as well as fences and telephone lines. Perhaps the biggest misconception is the false belief that it is a parasite that damages its host-trees. It takes absolutely no nourishment from the trees on which it grows and puts down no roots into them. Instead, all its water and nutrients are absorbed from rain and airborne dust through its scaly leaf-strands. Scientific studies have suggested that Spanish Moss becomes more prevalent on dying tree limbs because such trees leach out more minerals that can then be absorbed by the epiphyte to enhance its own growth. The presence of Spanish Moss on the trees is not the cause of their decay or deterioration. (It is notable that, of the dozen articles I read from universities and other sources in researching this article, the only one that mentioned anything negative about Spanish Moss was from a Tree Nursery company).

Although Spanish Moss is a flowering plant, its blossoms are tiny and difficult to notice. When pollinated by insects they produce tiny hairy seeds that are dispersed by the wind. Birds and squirrels use Spanish Moss as nesting material, and bats roost in it. People once weaved it into clothing, blankets, floor mats, and cord, and in the early 1900s it was popular for stuffing mattresses, furniture, and the seats of cars. However, if stored on the ground before such uses, Spanish Moss can become infested with chiggers (but not while it hangs in the air).