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Who's Awake? Wee Twooo!

The bedside phone woke us at 9am last Saturday. Normally, we're awake before that, but we didn't get to sleep until after two. Late-night party? Hardly. Carol's shift at her new part-time job, a server at City Limits (previously Marvel Lanes) in East Lansing, didn't end until after one. I had waited up for her.

It was a good run. For twelve years our family of six had survived on income from nothing but freelance education through the home-business. (I founded it fresh out of MSU twelve years before that, while Carol worked full-time in her field as an analytical chemist.) Quite amazingly, it's been totally operative without support from grants or subsidies of any kind. Can we take pride in that? Absolutely! Most nature centers and other educational facilities would cave in a heartbeat without them.

There is no time to wallow, though. Every dime we generate comes solely from time spent with specially-appointed audiences. The vast majority of our labor "behind the scenes," however, generates no direct pay. Hours a day are required on zookeeping, then all the other aspects of operating a successful business... Excuse the messy house.

The overwhelming bulk of our annual income falls between April and September. We are, in fact, *ridiculously* busy through these months, but it doesn't quite make up for the lean – and getting leaner – stretch from October through March. At first glance, one might assume we'd be hopping with school visits, but the winds have changed, from both, economic and curricular perspectives. Opportunities in schools for paid professional visiting programs have diminished remarkably over the past decade.

Thankfully, Montessori Children's House in Lansing, Stepping Stones Montessori in East Lansing, and, most recently, Okemos Nursery School, see the critical value in providing children with a regular natural science curriculum. Fairview Elementary in Lansing also utilizes us for much of the school year as their science specialists. These weekly contracted visits provide a stable income base for us through the (paradoxically) lean months of the school year.

Getting back to that phone call...

A woman who lives west of Shaftsbury was referred to us for help with a potentially dangerous wildlife emergency. Overnight, a great-horned owl had managed to get into her chicken pen, and now, was too spooked to allow itself to be shooed toward the open gate on the other end. She was afraid of injuring it, or it, her. I said I'd be there soon.

As I got dressed I flashed back to the mid-80s and an encounter I had with an old professor in MSU's Natural Resources Building. The dexterity of the fingers in one of his hands was severely limited. Years before, he had been handling a great-horned owl. It struggled and he lost his grip. A set of talons had dug deeply into the underside of one forearm, tearing through muscle and tendons.

I arrived in the thickest gloves and coat sleeves that I owned. She gave me an old, heavy quilt which I would attempt to throw over it. The owl repeatedly leaped against the chicken-wire siding, hanging by its talons for a minute or more before tiring and dropping back into the snow. As it eyeballed me from the ground, with quilt spread, I edged closer like a matador approaching a bull, then dropped it over the bird. Once covered, it hardly moved at all. I wrapped my hands tightly around the form, lifted it and calmly walked outside the gate. The owl never struggled, and the exposed talons clutched wads of snow.

I didn't ask for any compensation for the service, but when I learned that the woman was a faculty-member at MSU's College of Education, I handed her a few of our promotional flyers and asked if she would pass them on to any colleagues or students. She said she'd be happy to.



Carol and I often discuss the fact that, as we work hard to keep our Michigan wildlife education business alive, we are asked to donate our expertise and associated time regularly via phone advice, email, or in person. Sometimes, it's at the drop of a hat, or, as in this case, roused from sleep on a weekend. An animal control business would charge big bucks for this.

Over the last couple of years, Carol has responded to numerous "snake-rescue" calls. Actually, some of the people acted as if she were rescuing *them* when she pulled a snake out of their basement. Out of curiosity, she called a couple of critter control places, and played the part of a homeowner with a "snake problem." The first said he didn't "do" snakes. The second said the minimum fee would be \$200, and he could make no guarantee that the snake would be successfully removed.

We cringe at the thought of Nature Discovery becoming synonymous with critter rescue before wildlife education, but in today's climate more than ever, it's diversify or die. Watch for a new link in the future on our website. We can definitely underbid \$200. Heck, we'll give you a coupon toward one of our educational programs, too.

-Jim McGrath



Introducing the WALKABOUT

*Monday Mornings thru
February & March
9 to 11am*



Beginning this Monday, February 8! Get some invigorating exercise and fresh air while discovering the wealth of flora and fauna observable from the rural road. Besides identifying trees and shrubs along the way, learn about their value to native wildlife. There is wealth of birds along the way to ID by sight and by “ear.” Much more, too! The advance of winter toward spring is apparent with each passing week.

Advance enrollment is required to join an intimate group of no more than three participants for a 3.4-mile naturalist-led trek around the country block. At a steady pace, the loop should take about an hour.

Make a reservation for one Monday, or more. We’ll walk in any conditions except the most severe, so dress accordingly. At the walk’s conclusion, we’ll update checklists of birds encountered and converse over hot or cold beverages and bagels. If you’d like to participate, but the distance seems like more than you can handle, contact us about arrangements for an abbreviated walkabout. If this offering becomes popular, we may consider adding a second weekday for enrollment! FEE: \$8/day.

“Meet the Peregrines” LAB (Lansing Area Birding!)



A Peregrine Falcon perches high on the east side of the Lansing Board of Water & Light power plant. A look through our spotting scope brings birds like this way closer than binoculars.

Saturday, February 12, 7:30 to 11am

For Adults & HS students. Join an intimate guided trip in our minivan to a few prime Lansing-area birding locations, including Potter Park, Moores Park, Cooley Gardens and other stops. Specialty birds are commonly found at each of these locations, including Peregrine Falcons, which call the power plant across the river from Moores Park home. Participants will be given bird checklists to keep track of the day’s finds. Enrollment is limited to five. Advanced enrollment required. FEE: \$20/person.

Wednesday, February 16, 9am to Noon

For Homeschool families. Participants can ride in our mini-van or carpool to the locations mentioned above. A maximum enrollment of ten lends to a quality experience for all. Checklists will be distributed to participants to keep track of birds encountered. Advance enrollment required. Not recommended for young children. FEE: \$7/person. Cheaper than a movie – and so much better!



Second Sunday

Songbird Nesting Box Workshop

*Sunday, February 13,
1 to 5 pm*

Doors are open from 1 to 5pm. A minimum \$3/person donation is requested. With the aid of our staff, visit our highly interactive Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Zoo. Hold a snake, feed some turtles, drop a cricket to a frog. Enjoy the action at our bird feeders. We currently have an unusual winter visitor – an Eastern Towhee, visiting the feeders daily.

Bluebirds, chickadees, titmice and nuthatches begin searching for, and claiming nesting cavities before the end of February. Put a box up this month, and be amazed at how quickly birds begin to inspect it. At 2pm, we'll feature ***Providing for Bluebirds & Other Cavity-nesters***, a Powerpoint presentation featuring the array of “secondary” cavity-nesters - birds which, unlike woodpeckers, cannot excavate their own cavity, but must find an existing one. We'll also cover the life histories of two alien cavity-nesting birds, the house sparrow and European starling, which routinely destroy eggs, nestlings, and even kill adult birds in their drive to reproduce. We'll cover the best ways to deter them, and in so doing, maximize the nesting success of your backyard bluebirds and others.

We'll have a limited number of bluebird nesting boxes for sale (\$16). With the aid of our staff, you can also build one on the bench right outside the door. In addition, we will demonstrate a highly effective automatically-resetting house sparrow cage trap, as well as a removable nest box trap accessory, available for sale (\$10). If you have a persistent house sparrow that has claimed a box in your yard, this will help you catch it. Feel free to contact us in advance to reserve a box or a trap.

Need help erecting one in your yard? One of our staff can dig a hole, sink a post and install one for a reasonable fee. Contact us!



Friday, February 18 Late Winter Birding Field Trip for Middle & High School Students

9am to 3pm. Experience wild birds around the area you've never seen before! We know where they are. We'll visit various locations around Lansing and travel as far as Maple River State Game Area in search of specialty birds you'll never see in your backyard, including Bald Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Northern Shrike, and more. Great-horned Owls are nesting now. We'll search for a nest and get super-close looks through our spotting scope. We'll provide a personal "Michigan Birds" checklist so each participant can keep track of the day's finds. Pack a bag lunch and bring binoculars. Advance enrollment required. FEE: \$50. (Ask us about arranging for us to pick up and drop your student right at your door!)



Monday, February 21 Michigan Wildlife Camp for students, K & older

9am to 3pm. Join us for a full day of in-your-face nature. Indoor activities include lots of interaction with our snakes, turtles, frogs, salamanders and lizards, as we handle, feed, and learn about them along the way. Keep your own bird checklist of species seen at the feeders and in the woods out back. We'll walk off-trail in search of a hidden insect that spends the winter in snowy fields (as long as a woodpecker doesn't find it!). Each student can take one home in a jar and watch for it to emerge from its hiding place in the spring. A hot lunch, snacks and plenty of hot chocolate are provided. Advance enrollment. FEE: \$45/student. Ask us about after-care.

Tuesday, February 22 Kensington Field Trip for Elementary students & older

Hand-feeding birds at this metropark, just east of Brighton, is the highlight of this field trip that begins and ends in Nature Discovery's classroom. We'll take pictures of all participants with bird-in-hand. Bring binoculars if you have them, dress warmly and pack a bag lunch for the road! Advance enrollment. FEE: \$50/student. After-care on request.



Southern Illinois Nest-Finding Eco Tour June 4-11, 2011



For over 20 years, ornithologist, Jeff Hoover has been monitoring the nesting success of neo-tropical migrant songbirds (warblers, vireos, flycatchers, thrushes) in the forests of southern Illinois, especially in relation to parasitism of their nests by the brown-headed cowbird. His research and findings have been highlighted on PBS programs, *Nova* and *New Explorers*. Cowbirds find active nests, remove the host's eggs and replace them with their own. As a result, songbirds spend their reproductive season raising young cowbirds instead of their own. Dr. Hoover has found that forest-nesting songbirds have declined dramatically due to the parasitism.

Each breeding season, Dr. Hoover's research team attempts to monitor as many active nests of Acadian Flycatchers and other songbirds as possible. His sample size is limited only by how many can be located at the onset of nesting, before the eggs hatch. Locating nests requires hundreds of man hours, concentrated in a two-week period in early June. Combing forests using honed search skills, as many nests as possible must be located and marked within this time. The nest's contents (number of host and cowbird eggs) are noted and the nest's location marked. Dr. Hoover's research team will then return to monitor and collect data from all marked nests over the ensuing weeks until the young have fledged.

Nature Discovery is leading a small group of participants to assist Dr. Hoover by acting as an extra nest-finding team during the week of June 6-10. We'll explore the lush forests and cypress swamps of southern Illinois with our eyes and ears open to our main focus - a "treasure hunt" for songbirds and their nests.

COST: \$900, includes all transportation, lodging, breakfast and lunch each day. Discount for double-occupancy. A maximum enrollment of 4 ensures a personal experience for all participants. Contact us for more details or to reserve a space.

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