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Albie's Favorite Time of Year?

How could it not be, for our fifteen-year-old, six-foot, albino black rat snake? He's a guy! Every year between late February and early March, the two adult female black rat snakes in our Michigan reptiles & amphibians zoo release a pheromone to indicate their readiness to breed.

The first one released its scent on February 25. We can't smell it and notice no outward difference in her behavior, but Albie's behavior change is very evident. Over the other eleven months of the year, the occupants of the large tank almost appear oblivious to each other. One snake crawls over another, and, from our point of view, they act as if they are barely aware of the contact.

When "love" is in the air, Albie follows the receptive female like a white shadow. She often allows him to perfectly align himself atop her convoluted length. Since he is a bit larger than her, the balancing feat is especially impressive. He slides forward along her length until his head rests on top of hers. Then, his tail goes to work. It flips under hers, turned upside down, then slides forward and back in a searching manner until, ultimately, his vent becomes aligned with hers. Meanwhile, the front quarter of his still-balancing body gently and rhythmically writhes over hers. It's truly a sensuous scene! Who says snakes are gross?! I'll leave the content of the paragraph just shy of an R-rating, and move on.

In the next week or so we're expecting an encore when the second female becomes receptive. Egg-laying occurs about six weeks after copulation. Incubation is then 60-70 days. Estimated hatch time should be mid-to-late June. Assuming about ten eggs per female and a full hatch, we'll need to conduct quite a home-placement program!

In the past, we've offered hatchlings to nature centers, school classrooms, and other facilities which use our educational services. If we have a big clutch, we may have to expand to make some available to private individuals. Since the black rat snake is a listed species in the state, possessing one, captive-bred or not, requires a permit from the Michigan DNR. This documents that it was acquired legitimately, and not removed from wild Michigan stock.

We better not count our snake-lings just yet, but stay tuned.

-Jim McGrath

“Goodbye, Winter” Weekend

Saturday & Sunday, March 12 & 13

\$3/person/day

On either day...

*** Personalized guided walks * Guided “birding by ear” walks * Michigan reptiles & amphibians zoo * Animal feeding frenzy * Snake-handling * Nest box building * Great photo ops * Refreshments * and more!**

Saturday, March 12, 10am to 5pm

11am Presentation: All About Bluebirds

Put a box up this month, and be amazed at how quickly bluebirds and other cavity-nesters begin to inspect it. In this Powerpoint presentation learn the ins-and-outs of providing a suitable nesting site for bluebirds, as well as for chickadees, titmice, tree swallows and other natives. Learn about the importance of monitoring the box against alien house sparrows, 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 to maximize the nesting success of your backyard bluebirds and others. Nest boxes, box kits, and house sparrow box traps will be available for sale while they last. Need help installing one in your yard? We’ll do it!



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There’s more... Check out Saturday’s early a.m. birding field trip on the next page!



Sunday, March 13, 1 to 5pm

2pm Presentation: Spring’s First Amphibians

In this presentation, utilizing Powerpoint images, audio recordings and live frogs and salamanders, meet the first Michigan amphibians to rouse from winter torpor to begin their noisy or secretive breeding cycles in the vernal pond - the tiger salamander, spring peeper, chorus frog, wood frog and leopard frog. Some occasionally begin before ice on the pond is completely melted! At the presentation’s conclusion, participants are encouraged to join a guided walk to the back of our property to view a productive vernal pond on the brink of its annual explosion of amphibian and invertebrate life.

Join Jim on the
WALKABOUT

Monday Mornings
thru March
9 to 11am



Horned Lark.

© Steve Sage

Get some invigorating exercise and fresh air while enjoying a walking lesson on flora and fauna observable from the rural road. We'll identifying trees and shrubs along the way, and their ecological connections to native wildlife. There is wealth of birds along the way to ID by sight and by "ear," like bluebirds, song sparrows, sandhill cranes, killdeer, red-winged blackbirds, meadowlarks, and horned larks (pictured). Much more, too! Winter's advance toward spring is apparent with each passing week.

Advance enrollment is required to join an intimate group of no more than four participants for the 3.4-mile 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.



This bridge over a canal on the east side of 127 is a perennial nesting site for phoebes, which begin to return in mid-March.

beginning to incubate eggs on nests. If water is open, there should be migrant waterfowl to view as well. 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.

Maple River
Early-Birding Field Trip
Saturday, March 12, 6:30 to 10:30am

For Adults & HS students. This field trip to Maple River State Game Area, north of St. Johns, is part of our Goodbye, Winter Weekend (see pg 2). Join an intimate guided trip in our minivan to view a host of early migrants. We'll arrive just as it's getting light to see if the first woodcocks have arrived and begun their unusual aerial courtship displays. Short-eared owls are sometimes seen in March, same time, same location. We'll scope an active bald eagle nest and find red-tailed hawks just

Why Our

Tropical-Migrant Songbirds

are Declining

*Friday, March 25,
7 to 9pm*

\$5/person



Cape May Warbler

© Steve Sage

Unlike our familiar backyard birds like the cardinal, the blue jay and the chickadee, Michigan's tropical-migrant songbirds are much less known by the general populace. These include many colorful little birds and beautiful songsters, such as warblers, vireos, flycatchers, buntings, orioles, thrushes and tanagers. Evidence indicates that, since the 1970s, numbers of these birds across the board, have declined by 50 percent or more. The environmental factors that triggered the decline, precipitated by human activity, are still with us. Left unchecked, any adult today has good reason to ponder whether these birds will still be around when their grandchildren are grown.



Ornithologist, Jeff Hoover's research on cowbird brood parasitism of migrant songbirds has been featured on PBS.

The evening features a 60-minute video highlighting the birds in decline, their ecology and their migratory journeys. It also follows ornithologists in the forests of Southern Illinois working to understand what is causing the decline, and ultimately, what needs to be done to curtail it. The program is a must-see for anyone interested in songbirds and their continued existence. Before the video, Jim will give a short presentation about the Brown-headed Cowbird and the behavior of brood parasitism – laying eggs in other birds' nests. More discussion follows the video.

Doors open at 6:30. Walk the trails or visit our Michigan reptiles & amphibians zoo. Refreshments available, too.

*** Ornithologist, Jeff Hoover, whose research is featured in the program, will present about his insights on May 21 at the Kirtland's Warbler Wildlife Festival in Roscommon, Michigan.

*** Jim is leading an ecotour to Southern Illinois, June 4-11. Participants will spend four days aiding Dr. Hoover's project by searching for, locating and marking active songbird nests for him to monitor through the nesting cycle. See the February newsletter or the link on our website for details.

Spring Break Day Camps & Field Trips



Nature Discovery Spring Day Camp

Mon & Tues, April 4 & 5, 9am-3pm.

For K thru 4th grade.

Students can sign-up for one or two days of nature and outdoor-oriented activities. Each day will encompass feeding, caring for, and handling our huge captive collection of Michigan snakes, turtles, frogs, salamanders and lizards. Each day will also offer a variety engaging outside explorations and activities dependent on the weather, including exploration of our vernal pond, just beginning to awaken with breeding frogs, salamanders and invertebrates galore.

Cost: \$50/day. \$45/day for more than one day or more than one child. Hot lunch and snack are provided. Ask us about after-care. Call or email to enroll.

Spring Day Field Trips

Mon thru Wed, April 4 thru 6, 8:30am-3:30pm.

For 3rd grade & older. Sign-up for any or all trips.

Monday, April 4: MAPLE RIVER ST GAME AREA

Tuesday, April 5: LANSING AREA BIRDING

Wednesday, April 6: KENSINGTON METROPARK

COST: \$55/day. \$50/day for more than one day or more than one student. Call or email to enroll in advance.

Thursday, April 7: HOFFMASTER STATE PARK

7:30am-5pm. Cost: \$75. Call or email to enroll.



Look for details about the above camps and more on the Spring 2011 link on our website!



***Ribbit? Not! March is the time to learn your frog calls!
Our CDs are always available for only \$14.***

***Nesting boxes: \$15 each. Inquire about installation.
House sparrow box trap: \$10.***

***Summer Camp Schedule will appear on the
website @ March 15. We'll email you the link!***

Become a fan of *Nature Discovery* on Facebook!

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