

In the spring of '09 the last trunk of a one-time, five-trunked, gnarly, old, half-dead willow on the south side of our house finally fell. We culled the odd branches, but let the trunk lie where it fell.

What do the neighbors think? Luckily, a neighborhood committee is not in place here to impose some ecologically-blind sense of aesthetic-correctness on us. Every few years, another of the rotting trunks would fall. We'd cut and haul it back to our fire pit, dwelling over the inevitable day when the last trunk would come down. When that day finally arrived, we never quite got around to sectioning and hauling it. Now, the prostrate trunk has become quite a summer social center for garter snakes.

While it stood, the willow was an arboreal eyesore. On separate occasions, someone knocked on our door and offered to cut and haul it for a fee. We declined. From a bird's-eye-view, it was the most popular tree in the yard! Our view through the bay window in our dining room confirmed it every day. Less than forty feet outside the window, it served as a backdrop to our busy bird-feeding station. Over twenty years we had witnessed a very long list of species perching, foraging and nesting among its foliage, dead and live branches, and trunks.



Our first spring here found a pair of wood ducks inspecting the boughs, apparently convinced there must be a cavity somewhere – to no avail. The next spring, I erected a nesting box on the trunk, about fifteen feet high with the opening directly facing the window. The female found it immediately. Ironically, though she nested inside the box nearly every year, we always missed the ducklings' emergence.

Then, a few years after the box was in place, a screech-owl claimed it as a seasonal roosting site. The owl would appear around the end of October and remain until late March or early April, presumably, when nesting had begun in some other cavity. How naturally-fitting that it would move out just a couple of weeks before the female wood duck would return to use the box in her way. The owl would hunker out of sight through the day, then, as dusk neared, it would awaken and cling to the rim of the hole, with its fluffy, sleepy-eyed face and cryptic breast feathers filling the opening. As darkness loomed, it would become more alert, its yellow eyes wide, and its head abruptly swiveling to the left, then to the right, keenly honed to surrounding sights and sounds.

One winter day I suggested that we try to serve the owl breakfast in bed. We noted its appearance at the hole at 5:20pm. I bought a mouse at the pet store and put it in a ten-gallon aquarium. The next day, a few minutes before the owl's silent alarm went off, we placed the aquarium on the ground almost directly under the box, and in plain sight from the window, then hurried inside to watch. It spotted the McGrath's Value Meal immediately. Most of the following half hour the owl's eyes remained riveted to the activity below, but the enticement did not lure it from the box any earlier than usual. As the air grew duskier, our best look was through binoculars and my spotting scope.

When the owl decided it was time to eat, it happened in a flash. The dark missile dropped out of the box and hit the mouse cleanly on the aquarium floor. Through the gloom, we could make out a very brief struggle, then stillness. A few seconds later the owl hopped onto the rim, its breakfast dangling beneath its clenched talons. It perched there for a full minute, head leisurely twisting left, then right, as if it were deciding where it would like to take its breakfast-to-go. It then leaped from the rim, and, with a few strong wing beats and a glide, disappeared into the dense spruces behind the willow. We high-fived each other over our successful bed-*and*-breakfast.



The following year we tried again under circumstances that turned out to be ill-advised. A deer mouse had gotten caught in the box trap set in our kitchen. (See December newsletter.) One of the kids suggested feeding it to the screech-owl, so, on that whim, we re-opened our restaurant. Deer mice are excellent jumpers, and I knew a ten-gallon tank would never hold it. However, we had an unused hexagon-shaped tank in the garage, easily three times the height. We dropped the mouse in for some test-jumps. It repeatedly came up short of the rim by only inches.

Again, it was nearly too dark to see before the owl dropped from the box to take its breakfast. With the mouse secured, the owl jumped and flapped its wings to fly off, only to crash into the aquarium's side and fall back. After about ten unsuccessful leaps, it was becoming apparent to the owl and to us that the bird was trapped. Before that moment, it had never occurred to me that, of course, it could not take flight straight up like a helicopter! All birds, except maybe a hummingbird, need a horizontal runway to gain lift.

My daughter and I ran outside to liberate it. When the dark shape saw us approach, it battered itself in a wild panic against the glass. We feared it would injure itself. I swiftly pushed the tank on its side and the owl disappeared into the night. The dead mouse was left behind.

The next day and for the ensuing days the owl was not in the box. We had broken its trust. The family was thankful when it eventually returned, but all agreed to leave the screech-owl cafe closed for a while.

We felt fortunate that the trunk donning the nest box was the last to go, but as it stood in solitude those last few years, no wood duck appeared. Without the cover provided by the surrounding trunks and messy branches, it must have become a less desirable nesting-option. However, it continued to be an acceptable winter screech-owl roost.

A twenty-year era ended abruptly on that spring day when we heard the loud, splintering crack followed by the deep thump. The box was crushed, but it didn't matter. We were thankful it happened a few weeks after the screech-owl had vacated it for the season, but there was no other tree close to the house on which to mount the box, even if it had survived the fall.

Our kids grew up with that willow - climbed its twisted trunks, witnessed the bounty it provided to wild things, and harbored rich experiences due to its intimate proximity that their friends would never know. Two of our four have now started lives of their own, but when they stop "home" on a summer day, they walk the perimeter of the lingering, sunken trunk to see how many garter snakes they can count.

-Jim McGrath



Last year's Muskegon-area trip participants view a roadside Red-shouldered Hawk.

CAPITAL AREA AUDUBON MUSKEGON FIELD TRIP Saturday, January 8

This Saturday, January 8, Jim will be leading a Capital Area Audubon-sponsored field trip to the Muskegon area. Many people are surprised to learn that, yes, there are fewer birds to be seen in Michigan in the winter than in the spring and summer, but there are a whole slew of species – mostly migrants from Canada and the Arctic – that call Michigan home through the winter, many of which can't be seen here other times of the year. The Muskegon Wastewater Treatment Facility and the Lake Michigan shoreline are some of the best places to visit. The full-day trip (7am to 5pm) is free of charge. We'll travel via volunteer car pool drivers. Contact us by Friday for details if you are interested in attending.

SECOND SUNDAY

Michigan Owls *Up Close* Sunday, January 9

Our home-based nature center is open from 1 to 5pm. A \$3/person donation is requested. Visit our highly interactive **Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Zoo** – the largest collection of native snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders in the state! Our knowledgeable staff can answer questions about any of nearly 100 animals on hand. Hold a snake, or feed a frog or turtle. Walk the trail in the natural area out back. On request, we'd be happy to supply an engaging personal guide.

At 2pm, ***Michigan Owls Up Close*** will be presented. Powerpoint images and audio recordings are used to introduce participants to the ten species found throughout the state. Find out which three are most likely to be encountered around your neighborhood. Learn which owl, once common throughout the state, is now considered extinct here. Find out why more owl species can be found here in the winter than in any other season. Find out “who” they are, and where and when to find them in this highly informative and entertaining presentation.



The Great Gray Owl, a Canadian migrant, can occasionally be seen in the U.P. in the winter. Photo by Erik Enbody

MLK DAY CAMP

***Monday, January 17
9am to 3pm
for K & older students***



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. Participants will keep their own bird checklists of species seen at the feeders and on the trails. In addition to time on the trails, we'll engage in outdoor games and make "snow candles" to take home. A hot lunch, snacks and plenty of hot chocolate are provided. Enroll in advance by email or phone. COST: \$45/student.



A Screech-owl responds to our recording. Have your binoculars ready when we turn on the spotlight!

Owling Night Encores

***Wednesday, January 19 or
Friday, January 28, 7-9pm***

By demand, we're scheduling two more nights with the owls. Join us for a Powerpoint presentation over hot beverages and cookies. *Michigan Owls Up Close* features all ten species found in the state, and one more that's now considered extinct here. Learn identification tips and vocalizations in addition to where, when and how to find them throughout the state. At the presentation's conclusion, we will go into the night and attempt to "call one in" with audio recordings for a close encounter. Dress warmly and don't forget your binoculars and camera!

Not recommended for preschool children.

Limited to 10 participants. Enroll in advance by email or phone. COST: \$10/person.

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