

Years after its publication, I've finally gotten around to reading "Last Child in the Woods," by Richard Louv. Frankly, I had never felt a personal need to read it. After all, I knew I was already on his side - a "preaching to the choir" thing. After a number of people expressed surprise that I had not read it, I decided to pick it up. So, is he preaching to the choir? Absolutely, but I'm only half-way through it, and find myself wondering why I put it off so long!

Having taught within our own proprietorship for 23 years now, driven by my own convictions and concerns on the same matters, reading Louv is pure affirmation, page after page, and it feels really good! His messages, interviews and quotes emanate a complete concurrence with the methods in which I relate to others through our business of wildlife education.

Here is one of the affirmations. Louv interviewed Elaine Brooks, the self-appointed keeper of a vacant 30-acre parcel in La Jolla, California. She steadfastly catalogued all life she found there. A retired community college teacher, she often brought her students to the site to make impressions on them about the land, as well as its wanton destruction caused by expediency and ignorance. Louv states that Brooks believed people are unlikely to value what they cannot name. "One of my students told me that every time she learns the name of a plant, she feels as if she is meeting someone new. Giving a name to something is a way of knowing it."

Learning a living thing's common name is the gateway to not just knowing it, but knowing *about* it, too.

Imagine a person who lacks such knowledge walking a trail through some brush on a summer day, when, *ouch*, the thorny branch of a bush hanging over the trail catches and snags the skin on his arm – the result, a shallow but painful and bleeding scratch. The stark encounter may produce thoughts that run deeper than *snip the overgrown limb*. Remove the entire offending bush, and it can never scratch again! Without the base knowledge, a person is far less capable of seeing the bush in any context other than his own circumstance.

A "naturally-schooled" person walking the same trail identifies the bush ahead by noting its leaves and associated thorns at a glance, but he doesn't just sidestep the overhanging branch and keep walking. He knows it as a Northern Prickly-Ash, one of only a couple of plants that grow in Michigan which is the food of the Giant Swallowtail larva – the largest butterfly in North America. He stops and carefully scans the branches for the distinctive caterpillar, finds one, then three more. He is also aware that, when touched, the larva defensively throws its head back, everting a bright-red, paired gland from the base, like devilish horns. He touches it, and the soft horns emerge. The ensuing pungent odor, strong but not unpleasant, is unique. It reminds him of nothing else he has ever smelled.



Giant Swallowtail larva.

© Steve Sage

He leaves the larvae and the prickly ash with a latent awareness that a Giant Swallowtail that flaps past on the wind next summer may very well be the same individual he just encountered today. A simple ecological illustration, kindled perhaps years earlier by a past introduction to the plant, the butterfly and their names, needs no further explanation. Prickly-ashes yield Giant Swallowtails. No prickly-ash, no Giant Swallowtail.

Amazingly, most schools have little to nothing in their curricula to teach students something as fundamentally simple as learning the common names of wild things. Those who set the curriculum obviously fail to see its importance. I know two that do - Montessori Children's House in Lansing and Stepping Stones Montessori in East Lansing. I teach at each school as a weekly specialist. After some of this year's lessons, elementary students can not only name the ten turtles, thirteen frogs and nine woodpeckers found in Michigan, they can identify them by sight, too. If you value this kind of education for your child (Or for yourself. Hey, this isn't just kid stuff!), please join us!

-Jim McGrath

CAPITAL AREA AUDUBON MEETING

Thursday, February 4, 7:30pm, at Fenner Nature Center

Jim will be presenting an original program entitled *A Bird in the Bush: Habitat & Commonality*. Birds are more diverse than any other terrestrial vertebrate class due to their evolutionary radiation into such a broad range of habitat niches. From a birder's perspective, in order to encounter the most species, it is imperative to hit as many habitat types as possible. In this Powerpoint presentation, Jim will test the audience's knowledge of birds in their habitats, touch on some Ecology 101, and discuss examples of man's influence on habitats - and birds affected by it, for better or worse. Doors open at 7. It's open to the public and free.



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. © Steve Sage

HOMESCHOOL CLASS:

Michigan Wildlife – Late Winter Term

Mondays, Feb 8, Feb 22, Mar 1 & Mar 8; 2-4pm.



Learn about Michigan snakes "first-hand."

At Nature Discovery, for 5 yrs and older.

This combination of interactive indoor and outdoor instruction, with a seasonal slant, will open students' eyes to the identification and ecology of a wide range of Michigan wildlife. Indoor lessons include contact with our huge captive collection of Michigan reptiles & amphibians. Outdoor lessons include winter tree, shrub and vine ID, bird songs and early migrants. This is no-games, no-crafts, no-nonsense, but all-fun and all-engaging education! Parents are encouraged to participate along with their children at no extra charge. Fee: \$10/child/day. Contact us to enroll in advance.

SECOND SUNDAY

February 14 at Nature Discovery

Looking for a unique outing on Valentine's Day? Our home-based nature center is open from 1 to 5pm. A \$3 donation is requested. Visit the largest collection of live Michigan reptiles and amphibians found in the state here. Our knowledgeable staff is on hand to maximize your experience. Walk the trail in the natural area out back. On request, we'd be happy to supply an engaging personal guide.

At 2pm, *Birding by Ear – Late Winter Edition*, will be presented. Learning to identify birds by sight is a good thing. However, attaining the ability to pick them out by their songs takes you to a level of avian awareness that blows away identification by sight alone! February may be the best month to start. A manageable number of common non-migrants are singing their breeding songs now. As migrants return, beginning in March, the number of songs out your window increases steadily. By May, a boggling 40 or more may be heard on a country lot! Powerpoint slides and recordings from the "birdpod" are used to familiarize participants with who is calling now. At its conclusion we'll step outside to listen and elicit some responses with the birdpod. Bring your binoculars!



The Black-capped Chickadee is one of a number of our non-migrants that has begun to sing its breeding song.
Photo by Erik Enbody

Following the presentation, join us for feeding time! Audiences of all ages are fascinated by seeing our turtles, frogs and snakes eating various foods and prey items. Refreshments for people available, too!

PRESIDENTS DAY Monday, February 15

For students, K thru middle school. 9am to 3pm.

As we did for MLK Day, we are offering two concurrent engagements: A camp here at Nature Discovery for K thru 5th grade, as well as a field trip for upper elementary thru middle school students. Younger students may be permitted on the field trip on an individual basis. The enrollment fee for each is \$50, in advance by email or phone. Further details are below.



Get into nature. Climb a tree!

Presidents Day at Nature Discovery

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. We'll also spend time outdoors, calling birds, honing the "power of the pish," climbing trees and going "off-trail." A hot lunch and plenty of hot chocolate is provided. Enroll in advance by email or phone.

Late-Winter Bird-A-Thon Field Trip

The MLK field trip was a smashing success – and loads of fun, too. We got awesome looks at a treetop Bald Eagle and also got to see a shrike dive from a wire into some cattails, then come back up with a frog in its beak – in the middle of January! A month later, we'll go back up to the Maple River area, north of St. Johns, looking for Michigan's two earliest nesting birds, the Bald Eagle and the Great-horned Owl, both of which are laying



eggs by mid-February. We know where the Bald Eagle nest is, and can set the spotting scope on it for close-up viewing. Great-horned Owl nests, large, bulky platforms of sticks, are also quite easy to locate. No doubt, other birds that you don't see just anywhere will show up, too. Students will keep checklists of the day's tallies. Bring binoculars, if you have them, and pack a bag lunch and snacks. Enroll in advance by email or phone.

On our January field trip, this adult Bald Eagle let us drive directly below it, and still seemed unfazed.

Mark March 6 & 7 on your calendar for



Nature Discovery is teaming with Michigan Wildlife Conservancy to bring a late-winter Michigan wildlife educational event to Mid-Michigan. This March, National Wildlife Week's theme is "Be Out There." In keeping, on a local level, ***Get Out – Go WILD***, held on March 6 & 7 at MWC's Bengel Wildlife Center, in Bath, offers a weekend full of eye-opening experiences. Our goal is to spark, in young and old alike, a hunger to get outdoors, and a personal desire to better understand the natural world. Both days feature a smorgasbord of high-quality, LIVE Michigan wildlife encounters, wildlife presentations, wildlife exhibits, and informative guided trail walks. Visit our website for pages of details – www.naturediscovery.net.

"Yes, Virginia, there are cougars in Michigan." This October '09 photograph was taken by a trail camera in the eastern UP. MWC will present Michigan is Cougar Country at the upcoming event.



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