



Warm April rains bring worms to the surface and send robins into reproductive overdrive. Photo © Greg Smith

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**Warm Spring Rains,
Worms and Robins**

Even those who are relatively indifferent to the pulses of nature can't help but notice "the smell." I distinctly remember it as an inner city child – perhaps on an early spring morning as I stepped out the door on my way to school. Call it "earthy" but I suspect the crux of it starts with the liberation of water - after months in a frozen and unusable state, transforming to sweet, life-renewing liquid. Temperatures rise in fits and starts, but each baptismal event from late March through April, especially on seasonably warmish days, triggers another stage in the bloom of life from microscopic within the soil to macroscopic throughout and above it. Across the ground's surface and rising into the air the associated aroma permeates our senses.

A dry day devoid of the above-described odors followed by a good overnight rain makes our noses twitch up and take notice. The transformation that has occurred while we slept is unseen, but we can *smell* it. This phenomenon only begins to explain why, specifically, warm, wet, early spring *nights* hold their own magical mystique.

Early April, 1982. Well into our second year of marriage, Carol and I found ourselves renting the upstairs flat of a two-story house in a residential neighborhood on the northwest side of Chicago. Back then, the concept of dedicating my life to raising awareness about the wondrous yet vulnerable world of biodiversity that surrounds us was a mere fetal heartbeat of what would blossom into the birth of my life purpose over the following decade.

I awoke with a start at about three a.m. to the inordinately loud sound of a robin tweedling its breeding song. It had alighted on a tree branch right outside the bedroom window. Some field guides list the tune's "words" as *Cheer up, cheerily, cheer up, cheer up... cheerily, cheer up, cheerily, cheerily...*, and so on. A distinct gap, a second or two in duration, separates each phrase.

Between the gaps in its song I could hear the caroling of not just one, but several other robins in the distance. How many more were singing beyond my hearing? Earlier in the evening a drenching rain had inundated the neighborhood. The wind had since abated to perfect stillness and the downpour to a misty

drizzle. I lay awake listening to the robins for several minutes while an urge steadily welled in me to get out and among them. I quietly rose, dressed, threw the hood up on my sweatshirt and stepped outside.

Behaviorally, “songbirds” are those in which, most often, the male of a pair claims then defends a nesting territory against others of its species with a vocal message unique to its kind. Males of migratory species begin claiming breeding territories shortly after arriving in the spring. Breeding activity is also often timed with a seasonal abundance of their preferred food. For robins successfully raising a brood depends on availability of large quantities of earthworms. After any or all in a series of cold snaps the eventual combination of warm and wet on an early or mid-April night brings them to the surface in great numbers. This sudden glut triggers the robin’s breeding imperative like nothing else, and with it, the intensity of the territorial announcement to all other robins within hearing range. Copulation and nest-building commence with gusto.

Daytime in the city is filled with the relentless, white noise associated with modern, densely-packed humanity. A robin’s song competes in a losing battle to be acknowledged, to stand out from the mechanically-generated cacophony. However, at barely after three o’clock on this particular morning it was as if every robin had noticed that our collective mute button had been pressed. It was *their* time to communicate. As I descended the stairs from the front porch and stepped onto the sidewalk so many robins sang near and far – loudly, like the one silhouetted in the bare maple branches over my head to beyond unseen auditory limits, blocks away in every direction - that any attempt at counting individuals was awe-inspiringly impossible.

I pulled off the hood as I started to walk. The light rain began to moisten my hair. It would soon be dripping wet, but I had to free my hearing from the slightest barrier so as to take in this ethereal orchestra as unfettered as possible. Block after block the tweedling of the robins I passed - perched in trees and shrubs, on house gutters and fence tops - steadily waned with every step as those I approached grew incrementally louder. The fact that I appeared to be the only human in the world recognizing, caring about, drinking in this circannual pinnacle of their existence made me yearn to shout to the slumbering city, “Wake up! Pay attention! It’s the song of the robin on its biggest night of the year! The song of the robin is a song of the *Earth! Listen!*”

A mental rebuttal arose almost as quickly from my culturally-bred self. Pragmatic awareness warned that if I shouted like the town crier at this hour the police would arrive before long to deal with the “situation.” More sobering, still, rose another awareness. If everyone really *did* leave their houses to acknowledge the wee-hour robin song their sheer number would become such a distraction as to most certainly kill the spirituality inherent in this amalgam of solitude and connectedness. So, I walked alone, bathed in these opposing convictions for nearly an hour, yet, perfectly rapt to the warm rain and robin song while carefully sidestepping the plethora of worms that glistened on the pavement.



When I finally crawled back into bed, Carol stirred and dreamily asked where I had been. I told her about the robins. She mumbled that she could hear them. Seconds later, her breaths became heavy and regular. It took me a long time to finally drift back to sleep though. The muffled chorus continued to penetrate the stillness of the room and roil the impetus of my life direction, as it had when I first awoke.

-Jim McGrath



Catch Us on LCC Radio's Coffee Break Friday, April 6

Jim is scheduled to appear on Friday, April 6 at 9:45am, discussing frogs and other spring things. The show airs weekdays from 9 to 10am on 89.7 FM. Listen live online at lcc.edu/radio/onair/ or watch it live (or later in the day at 6pm) online at lcc.edu/tv/watch. We'll post a reminder on our Facebook fan page.

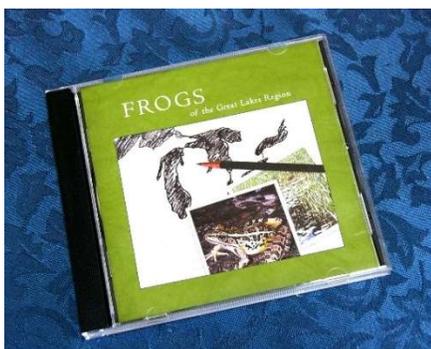
Frogging "by Ear"

Sunday, April 8

***Doors open from 1 to 5pm
Admission: \$5/person***



What frogs breed in your neighborhood? Through spring and early summer, you need not get your feet wet to find out. Michigan is home to 13 species of frogs and toads, eight of which can be found around the Greater Lansing area. Each can be identified by its specific breeding call, given only by the male. Each species also has its own breeding "window," the period of time when it is egg-laying on a particular wetland from early spring to mid-summer.



At 2pm, sit-in on our presentation, *Frogging "by Ear."* With the use of beautiful Powerpoint images, live specimens, and audio recordings from Nature Discovery's original CD, *Frogs of the Great Lakes Region*, immerse yourself "knee-deep" into the world of Michigan frogs.

Our *Frogs of the Great Lakes Region* CDs are normally priced at \$19. Participants are invited to purchase one for only \$14.

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 or ask for your own personalized guided walk on the trail to our vernal ponds. Knowledgeable staff is on hand to help visitors of all ages make the most of their visit.

Around the State in April

- ❖ *Saturday, April 7: 10am-4pm. Michigan Turtles Exhibit; MSU Science Festival, East Lansing.*
- ❖ *Thursday, April 19: 9am-2pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; MDEQ Earth Day Celebration, Constitution Hall, Lansing.*
- ❖ *Thursday, April 19: 5:30-7:30pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; , Lansing Charter Academy, Lansing.*
- ❖ *Saturday, April 21: 10am-3pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Huron Schools STEAM Showcase, Bad Axe.*
- ❖ *Wednesday, April 25 5:30-7:00pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Okemos Public Montessori, Central School, Okemos.*
- ❖ *Wednesday, April 25: 7:00pm. MI Wildlife Presentation; Howell Garden Club, Howell.*
- ❖ *Saturday, April 28: 11:30am-2:30pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; St. Clair Co. Earth Fair, Goodells.*

Dansville / Portage Lake Spring Birding Day

TUESDAY, APRIL 24

7am to 2pm

Join this intimately-sized group of adults on a guided morning visiting a diversity of habitats in and around Dansville and then down to the Portage Lake area in Jackson County on the east side of Waterloo Recreation Area. Swallows, shorebirds, and migrant songbirds, waterfowl, woodpecker and more. Weather-permitting over 50 species should be tallied in all. Participants will receive a Michigan Birds checklist to keep track of the day's finds. FEE: \$60, includes all transportation from Nature Discovery.



Tree Swallow.

Photo © Steve Sage.



CEDAR CREEK The Official Vets of Nature Discovery!

This female Eastern Garter developed a respiratory infection a few weeks ago. A visit to Cedar Creek Veterinary Clinic and a round of antibiotics later she's back on her belly scutes and back on the job, educating people about snakes, garter snakes and their rightful place in our world. Learn more about Cedar Creek Vets at www.cedarcreekvet.com.

2017 Summer Day Camp Schedule

is on our website now! Click this link:

<http://www.naturediscovery.net/pdf/summercamps.pdf>



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NATURE DISCOVERY 5900 N. Williamston Road Williamston, MI 48895

(517) 655-5349 naturedisc87@gmail.com www.naturediscovery.net