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*Montessori Children’s House student, Ava Spry, can’t contain her excitement during her first portrait with a snake.*

**“Portraits With Snakes”  
Light a Fire**

Children have an undeniable fascination and curiosity toward other living things. The staff at Montessori Children’s House in Lansing, Stepping Stones Montessori in East Lansing, and most recently, Okemos Nursery School, recognize and embrace this natural affinity by providing for regular lessons from Nature Discovery that are highly engaging and experiential.

Through the elementary years, these lucky children not only attain an impressively broad knowledge base across an array of species of bugs, birds, frogs, squirrels, snakes, and more, but develop a strong sense of awareness of natural diversity, in general. They recognize, understand and show concern toward it. They are likely to carry this sense of value into adulthood and continue to embrace it throughout their lives. How can the world not be better off for it when so many others, having missed such opportunities during their formative years, view natural diversity as a faceless obstacle to be squashed or bulldozed in the quest for personal gain?



*Stepping Stones 2<sup>nd</sup> grader, Marie Adele Grosso, confidently shows off the fox snake in her third annual portrait.*

Snakes are some of the most reviled creatures on the planet not by their fault, but from a rain of negativity spread through society from one generation to the next, based on superstition, misinformation, and erroneous interpretations of their behaviors. Over more than two decades presenting about, and discussing them with thousands of people of all ages, I’ve found there is little doubt that, in general, the older the person, the less tolerant of snakes. Yet, the younger, the more tolerant. Further, many adults claim - often inexplicably to them - that they remember being fine with snakes when they were kids, but then, over years, have grown to dislike them. It’s as if children have not been around long enough to be exposed to, and swayed by society’s serpent-bashing. Just give it time...

With a collection of Michigan snakes at our disposal, most of which are completely non-threatened by touching or handling, we have an opportunity to give these students regular hands-on experiences, the positive results of which are likely to last a life time. At any point in their lives, when negative or erroneous information is cast their way by a friend, a relative, or the even the media, they'll have solid personal experience on which to draw. They'll be in a position to dismiss the negativity, or, perhaps even seize the opportunity to educate the antagonist.

This goal is the inspiration behind our annual "portraits with snakes" in each Montessori school. We just finished the 2011-12 school year portraits earlier this month. Having done it now for the past six years, some parents have kept their child's portraits with snakes from each grade as keepsakes that are sometimes more treasured than their Lifetouch portraits!

When kindergarteners cradle or "wear" a large, gentle, black rat snake or fox snake for their first portrait, the genuine thrill is evident on many of their faces. In contrast, the eyes of elementary students who have had several years of such portraits, as well as many other opportunities with the snakes through the years, shine with positivity - from that of perfect confidence and comfort in handling the snake, to outright affection.

Last year, when viewing the Montessori Children's House website I came across this quote from W.B. Yeats: "Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire." How can that statement not induce introspection in any serious teacher? Portraits with snakes fit the quote to a T, and the faces tell the story.



*Benni Goertler laughs when the fox snake decides it wants to be on his shoulders instead of in his hands for the portrait.*

*-Jim McGrath*



*A first year Snowy Owl is heavily patterned. It will steadily molt to whiter, less-patterned plumages with age. Having hatched on the tundra this past summer, these are surely its first close encounters with curious bipedal mammals.*

## *Muskegon Area Birding Trip Offers Great Looks at Seldom Seen Birds*

The Snowy Owl to the left was the highlight of our birding field trip for adults to the Muskegon area on Saturday, November 26. While perched on the rocks next to one of the gargantuan holding ponds at the Muskegon Wastewater Facility, the bird seemed unfazed as we approached to only twenty feet away!

Disappointingly, only two people, Jan Heminger and Judy Marr - both of Williamston, attended the trip, but they'll be the first to tell anyone the birding was a blast. We tallied 35 species for the day, other highlights of which included Northern Shovelers by the thousands, Snow Geese, Horned Grebes, a prolonged close-up of a Northern Shrike, swirling flocks of Snow Buntings, and a couple of Common Loons. Thanks for coming, ladies!

# *Birding Alert!*

For nearly two weeks now, it's been all over internet birding sites: a **Pacific Loon** has been spending time at Sterling State Park, along the shore of Lake Erie, in Monroe County. This species is a bit smaller than our Common Loon, breeds in the Arctic, and normally migrates down the Pacific coast. Not often, an individual veers off course and shows up on one of our Great Lakes. There is no telling how long this bird will stay, or when another opportunity will come along.

This **Wednesday, December 7**, Jim will drive and lead an impromptu trip with up to 5 interested birders to Sterling State Park to find and view the bird through a spotting scope, in addition to birding the rest of the park and other spots in the vicinity. We'll depart from Williamston at 8:30am and return by 4:30pm. **COST: \$45/person**, includes all transportation. Call or email asap to reserve a spot.

To view impressive up-close images of the loon (and many more beautiful bird shots, with helpful ID tips and explanations by birder/photographer, Jerry Jourdan, go to <http://jerryjourdan.blogspot.com>.



*Attend Our*

## ***HOLIDAY OPEN HOUSE***

***Sunday, December 11***

***1 to 5pm     \$5/person***

*Come any time or stay all afternoon! With our huge zoo of Michigan reptiles & amphibians, we won't run out of things to see and do...*

*\* Hand-feed box turtles, baby snapping turtles, wood turtles and our exotic red-footed tortoise. \* Cradle our large and gentle bearded dragon. \* Drop live crickets into any of our unprecedented, complete collection of Michigan frogs. \* Watch as garter snakes and water snakes take turns gobbling up worms and fish. \* Learn how, then try your hand at safely picking up a large snapping turtle. \* Drop crickets in and watch our hyper and ever-hungry shrew chase them down. \* View and identify birds at our busy feeders. \* Take a guided walk on the trails. \* Handle large and gentle rat snakes, fox snakes, a blue racer, and more snakes. \* Photo ops, galore. \* Snacks and beverages available, too!*

*For any donation, **CREATE YOUR OWN DIGITAL PHOTO HOLIDAY CARD!** We'll take a photo of your child (or your family) holding a snake, the bearded dragon, a box turtle or other resident animal. We'll add a custom message of your choice, then email it to you for distribution to family and friends!*





## *Winter Solstice Wildlife Day Camp*

***Mon thru Wed, December 19-21 9am-3pm***

For K & older. Looking to keep your child engaged during a week off school while you work or shop? Enroll for one, two or three days of hands-on Michigan nature. Participants will visit with over 100 animals at our highly interactive Michigan reptiles & amphibians zoo! Identify, handle and feed many of our 13 snake species, 10 turtles, 13 frogs and 7 salamanders. Students love holding our bearded dragon. We'll watch and identify birds at our busy feeders then check them off on personal checklists.

We'll spend time outside and on the trails, too. A photo of your student in action will be emailed to you. Hot lunch, hot chocolate, and snacks provided! Enroll in advance by phone or email.

COST: \$50/day; \$135/three days.



## *Birding Day Trip*

***Thursday, December 22 9am to 3pm***

For upper elementary students and older. Join Jim for a whirlwind day of seeing how many bird species we can encounter in a 6-hour span. We'll drive to Maple River State Game Area, then visit a number of natural areas around Lansing. Bald eagles, peregrine falcons, shrikes, snow buntings and many, many more. Each student will be provided with a personal Michigan Birds checklist to keep a running tally species through the day. At day's end, arrange for your student to be dropped right at your door! Pack a bag lunch, binoculars and warm clothes.

COST: \$55/student.



## *Kensington Metropark Field Trip*

***Wednesday, December 28 9am-3pm***

Hand-feeding birds on the trails is the highlight of the trip! Jim will take photos of each participant with a chickadee, titmouse or nuthatch in hand and email it to a parent. We'll also visit the nature center, walk trails and explore other bird life around the expansive park. Student will have an opportunity to keep a checklist of the day's bird encounters. Bring binoculars if you'd like, pack a bag lunch and dress warmly.

COST: \$55/student.



*To have a wild bird alight on your hand creates a unique feeling of connectedness to nature.*



*A Screech-owl is spot-lighted after responding to our recording.*

## ***Between-the-Holidays Owling***

***Mon or Fri, December 26 or 30 7 to 9pm***

Join us Monday or Wednesday, December 26 or 30 from 7 to 9pm for a Powerpoint presentation over hot beverages and cookies. ***Michigan Owls*** features all ten species found in the state, and one more that's now considered extinct here. We'll discuss some of the physical adaptations that make an owl such an efficient nocturnal predator, and offer insight on the identification, vocalizations, behavior and ecology of each species. 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!

\$10/person. Limit, 10 participants. Contact us for advance enrollment. Not recommended for preschool children.

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