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**Blind Birding
Solitaire**



There is still time to see this Townsend's Solitaire, a rare vagrant from the Rocky Mountain states, on Fenner Nature Center property. Photo © Steve Sage

Three people - Jan Heminger, Gregg Landick, and Donna Posont - enrolled for our U.P. winter birding trip, January 18-21. The group tallied 42 species over the long weekend, a number of which (like, Northern Hawk-owl, Gray Jay and Pine Grosbeak) are virtually impossible to find as far south as mid-Michigan.

When everyone was assembled Friday morning, I suggested a short detour into Lansing before beginning our long northward trek. A few days before, on the "mid-michbirds" list serve, a Townsend's Solitaire was reported on the grounds at Fenner Nature Center. On Friday the bird was still hanging around the same pond, ringed with leafless deciduous trees and shrubbery on the east side of the nature center acreage.

The normal range of the Townsend's Solitaire, a member of the thrush family, is in the western third of the continent. The bird typically inhabits the Rocky Mountains vicinity from Canada, through the U.S., and overwintering as far south as Mexico. It looks a lot like a bluebird, but with a longer tail. Most of its plumage is uniformly gray, but it also sports a distinct white eye ring, white outer tail feathers, and tawny patches on its wings that are especially evident when it flutters in place - a distinctive habit while it gleans berries from a tree or shrub.

For this species, it is not uncommon for an individual to wander eastward out of its normal migration path. Almost every winter a vagrant or two may pop up somewhere in Michigan, but, to any local birder's knowledge this is the very first record for the Lansing vicinity. In 2006, I had seen my first solitaire at Bishop Lake Campground in Brighton Recreation Area. That bird lingered, feeding on berries of the same juniper at Campsite #39 every day, for over six weeks!

None of the participants in our group had ever seen one, so the detour was well worth it. When we arrived, finding the bird was a piece of cake. We just had to look for other people near the pond staring into the shrubbery through raised binoculars. One man we met had seen the post on the internet and drove all the way from Grand Rapids that morning to see it. As of this writing, the solitaire persists in the same vicinity at Fenner - over three weeks now. Apparently when one of these birds finds a good berry-feeding area in the winter, it sticks!

You'd assume everyone in our group got to see the bird. Well, actually..., Donna, positioned right next to the rest of us never caught a glimpse. You might be prompted to say, "What is she, blind?" Bingo.

Donna has participated in Nature Discovery activities for several years, now, and over that time I've come to admire the attitude with which she confronts her handicap. Rather than dwell on the myriad negative effects visual impairment imposes on her life, Donna approaches any experience as if she were not. Don't tell her she can't participate in an activity because she's blind. She'll take it as a challenge and show you otherwise.

Donna has enthusiastically immersed herself in birding. She's attended many Nature Discovery presentations and field trips where birding-by-ear is emphasized. (What used to be more commonly known as "bird-watching" has been shortened to, simply, "birding." Why? Any accomplished birder will tell you that far more birds can be identified over the course of a day "by ear" than by eye, especially during spring and summer. By extension, anyone who is unable to identify birds by the sounds they emit is missing the majority of them in his or her immediate surroundings.)

In keeping with her environmental education studies at University of Michigan, Dearborn, Donna continues to develop and facilitate experiential outdoor opportunities specifically for the visually impaired. She now leads her own youth club dubbed The Bird Brains. They've attended several Nature Discovery presentations and have contracted us to lead field trips, as well.



Silent Sentinel: A first-year Snowy Owl perches atop a roadside pole barn on M-28 just west of I-75. It tolerated our approach but kept its eye on us throughout the visit.

Of course, breeding season – spring through early summer – is prime time for the visually impaired or anyone else to go birding. The frequency and variety of bird song is at its peak. In 2010, Donna and one of her teen subjects arranged to participate with sighted youth in our early summer birding camp. Our ultimate goal is to visit as many habitats as possible within an hour drive each day in order to identify as many species as possible. By week's end that summer we had tallied an impressive 86 species. Donna and Steven were able to experience all but about ten of them auditorially!

When Donna approached me about enrolling in the January U.P. birding trip, I needed to warn her that very few of the birds we encounter would be vocalizing in the dead of winter. She wouldn't let that stop her. She wanted to be around the other birders while we took in the views. Then, she'd absorb our descriptive conversation and let her mind's-eye do the rest.

Read Donna's impressions of the trip on Page 4.

-Jim McGrath

Catch Nature Discovery on WLNZ Radio's Coffee Break on February 12

Jim is scheduled to appear this month on Tuesday, February 12 at 9:30am. 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 also post a Facebook reminder prior to the show.



Open Hours

Sunday, February 10

1 to 5pm; \$5 admission

2pm Presentation

Birding by Ear *Late Winter Edition*

The Tufted Titmouse and a dozen other winter resident songbirds ratchet up their breeding songs in February. Photo © Steve Sage



At 2pm, *Birding by Ear – Late Winter Edition*, will be presented. Cued by our lengthening days, chickadees, titmice, cardinals and many other winter resident songbirds have ratcheted up the volume, intensity and frequency of their breeding songs. Learning to identify birds by sight is a useful skill, however, when you are able to step outside and “bird by ear,” you graduate 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 species 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 the presentation’s conclusion we’ll step outside to identify singers and elicit some responses with the birdpod. Bring your binoculars!

Don’t forget! Our **Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Interactive Zoo** is open to all ages for visitation before, during and after the presentation. Handle snakes. Feed frogs and turtles. Ask one of our staff members for a guided walk on the trails.



Michigan Owls & “Owling” *Wednesday, February 20, 7 to 9pm*

The evening begins with 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 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!

\$12/person. Limit, 10 participants. Contact us for advance enrollment. Not recommended for preschool children.

Sensing Nature's Beauty: Winter Birding in Michigan's Upper Peninsula

One might wonder why a blind person would venture to Michigan's very cold Upper Peninsula to find birds. Indeed, it has been confirmed that I love birding by ear, but this did not resemble an outing like that. For the most part, the winter birds are silent. I will admit that a couple of times when I was very, very cold, I found myself wondering what I was doing on the January trip. Fortunately, those thoughts were fleeting, and then I remembered.

Over Martin Luther King Weekend I traveled with three other adults on a winter birding trip organized by Nature Discovery. We had gone over the fact that the birding would be almost entirely visual, and I would be able to hear very little, if anything, from the birds. I assured Jim that I would still enjoy hearing the discussion about the sightings and all the surrounding conversation about the identified bird species. Indeed, I did experience a thrill when Snowy Owls were seen and described. I marveled at the thrill felt by those who had never seen a Northern Hawk-owl before. Their descriptions of the birds made the pictures vivid in my mind. At one particular stop where there were bird feeders, I excitedly listened to Blue Jays in surround-sound. I got really close to a noisy Pileated Woodpecker. I also heard the familiar Black-Capped Chickadees, American Goldfinches, Downy Woodpeckers and the extremely vocal ravens. I even claim to have heard a Black-Backed Woodpecker that no one else saw. The falling snow and howling wind could not muffle those welcome bird sounds.



Something strange happened to me on Sunday. I know the word awesome is overused, so I cannot use it without saying that I was filled with awe. We were hiking the Peshekee Grade, which is an old logging road west of Ishpeming. I was straining to hear the call of a Boreal Chickadee. Surrounded with giant species of elegant pines mixed with various deciduous trees, it struck me that the wonder was in what I was not hearing. With the only sound being our boots crunching through the frozen trail the silence was deafening. I realized that I was overwhelmed with the sense of majesty and grandeur of the landscape. With an occasional whipping of the wind, there was silence so strong that I felt as if I might have heard a snowflake landing on my cheek. It was a snapshot in time that could never be reproduced in any book, on any recording or even in the recounting of any tale. I was truly sensing nature with every fiber of my being and the use of ears or eyes could not have made the adventure more magnificent.



Peshekee Grade offers miles of easy winter wilderness walking through countless vistas in addition to possibilities for birds and other wildlife that are hard to find elsewhere.

-Donna Posont

Cedar Creek Vet to the Rescue!

Dr. Derek Nolan of Cedar Creek Veterinary Clinic in Williamston administers a dose of medication orally to one of Nature Discovery's softshell turtles. We found a parasitic tapeworm protruding from the little guy's rear end. Our regular students at Okemos Nursery School, Montessori Children's House and Stepping Stones Montessori got an opportunity to inspect it under a magnifying glass.



Climate Change Realist

This past Friday, NPR's *Science Friday* presented a 47-minute discussion with a panel of climate and energy experts entitled, *Are We Losing the Race Against Climate Change?* Host, Ira Flatow and guests discuss how the world is tackling global warming--with or without us--and what it might take to change the climate on Capitol Hill:

<http://sciencefriday.com/segment/02/01/2013/are-we-losing-the-race-against-climate-change.html>



Our geothermal installer, Doty Mechanical, Inc., of Lansing, contracted Geothermal Trenching Systems of Grand Rapids to bore five separate tunnels, each over 200 feet long and 10 feet deep. Looped flexible pipe is fed through the tunnels then filled with water. The ground warms the water to ~53 degrees. The heater only has to work to raise the temperature another 15 degrees to make the house comfortable through the coldest nights.

Our geothermal conversion is complete, but by all means we are aware that it is just one step in the never-ending trek toward reducing our carbon footprint. It feels good to have dumped our dirty, oil-burning furnace for a water furnace, but this doesn't mean we're no longer burning fossil fuels for our heat. While the overall fuel consumption is less, our electricity usage to run the furnace and water heater has now increased. Implementation of solar and other renewable energy sources are the next step in our journey. Stay tuned...

Become a fan of ***Nature Discovery*** on Facebook!
Check out our Youtube channel, ***Wild Williamston***, too!

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