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Skull Stories: Unlucky Rabbits

My dad passed away in 2016. A few years later my mother ‘reunited’ with her husband of 68 years. I joined my many siblings to help empty the apartment in an assisted living facility in suburban Chicago. Hasty decisions were made as to which of us would take pieces of furniture and so much more of their accumulated possessions. The rest would be given to a charity thrift store or otherwise dispatched.

The upright, dark-finished, wood-framed curio cabinet with now bare glass shelves generated no interest from me or any of the others. It was settled: thrift store; or so I thought until my sister-in-law, Cynthia, piped up, “You know, Jim, your skull collection would look great in here.”

All the way back to my childhood I had passed and looked at that cabinet - glass shelves bearing neatly arranged dainty glass vessels, decorative china and framed photos - so many times that the contents had long ago become visually inconsequential to me. Now, Cynthia’s words made me turn and look at the cabinet as if for the first time. I mentally filled the empty shelves, surveyed it through my mind’s eye, and liked what I saw. Hours later, we were on our way back to Michigan, the cabinet stowed on its side in the back of the van.

I could imagine the ‘earthly’ mother I had known horror-stricken over this abomination about to befall her precious cabinet. It was too soon for any of us to utter the word *rolling* but the idiom was surely on others’ minds, too. Then, just as easily I found myself imagining my ‘beyond-earth’ mother smiling and laughing over her grown children regarding the outrageous twist of the cabinet’s fate after her own intention for it no longer mattered.

At our “big little” nature center there are natural wonders to check out at every turn. Eventually, visitors stop in front of this curio cabinet. They scan the array of clean, shiny mammal skulls of all sizes and shapes, then ask, *Where did you get these?*

We explain that there is no blanket answer. Each skull of some thirty Michigan species accumulated over decades has its own story. With the exception of only a few which were donated to us by another individual, each specific mammalian misfortune was most likely found deceased somewhere outside.

You can guess the most common location – yes, on the road... Unfortunately, the vast majority of road mortalities incur broken and fractured bones from the impact which usually includes the skull, thus rendering them unusable. However, the relative handful of victims that appear unscathed on the shoulder - as if just taking a nap - offer more promise to have the skull intact.

The process of cleaning and preparing any of them basically involves removing the head, boiling it to soften the tissue, then using various cutting, picking and pulling tools to disencumber it of hide, flesh, eyes, brain, etc. Eventually, the hollow skull is steeped in hydrogen peroxide, allowed to dry, then dipped in a can of wood finishing polyurethane and allowed to dry again. The glossy end product would look at home in any museum's display case.

I pass road-killed animals with an automatic intent to identify them. Deer, of course, are large and abundant. The victims are easy to spot and identify at great distances. I'd rank a few combined squirrel species as the most commonly seen mortalities. Raccoons, opossums, and skunks sleep through the year's coldest weeks, but join the road-kill parade in increasing numbers as winter transitions to spring and then all through the summer and fall. Muskrats are largely missing from the road-kill ranks over nearly eleven months of the year. Suddenly, with the arrival of a mid-March thaw, a mass urge to disperse ensues, and for the next few weeks roads near wetlands are littered with their dark, dense and sleek, flattened pelts.

Everyone in our family has endured myriad pullovers or U-turns for a second pass at the victim if I suspect it might be something less common, or perhaps heretofore unrepresented in the nature center's skull collection.

It is usually the telling of the circumstance involving the dead animal's acquisition that generates raised eyebrows or even belly laughs; naturally, when you consider that circumstances surrounding their acquisition involve behaviors and actions most would deem atypical of an adult human in modern society. The stories surrounding the coyote and skunk skulls are good ones. Though not a wild Michigan mammal, per se, the house cat story is a good tell, too.

For its relative commonality, you would think that the skull of a cottontail rabbit would be a fairly quick acquisition. A combination of bad luck, bad timing and unanticipated turns of events resulted in it taking many years not just to acquire one, but to keep it long enough to get a chance to acceptably prepare it.

As previously mentioned, by far, most road victims' bodies and heads are broken or smashed and useless, including those of rabbits. We've spotted many more in this condition only to find that, while a raccoon or opossum carcass may lay in place for many days, even the most mangled rabbits would nearly unanimously vanish within twenty-four hours.



Tastier than the average road-kill?

Every carnivorous human knows, there are different tastes, textures, levels of moisture, and even degrees of greasiness across the meats of various animals, whether originating on a farm or in the wild. If humans have preferences, why also wouldn't a scavenging animal? We thus surmise that rabbit meat must surely be tastier, perhaps even more nutritious, to a typical scavenger than other run-of-the-mill mammal meats.

I'd become aware of the propensity for rabbit bodies to vanish quickly the hard way over multiple sets of circumstances. While driving near home at night I'd spot a dead rabbit on the shoulder illuminated by the headlights, make a note to come back to retrieve it in the morning, only to find it gone when I returned.

A rabbit carcass wasn't even secure overnight on our driveway. One winter afternoon I found one on my

way home from an errand to Mason (more details on that straight ahead). I tossed it onto a shoveled snow pile on the side of the driveway to keep it cold until I could tend to it in the morning. Big mistake. I could find no sign that it had been dragged away overnight; it just vanished, like *The Walking Dead*.



*Vultures migrate through the state in March.
Our inadvertent eatery drew some travelers.*

Even allowing a rabbit body to linger on the driveway through the daylight hours proved costly. One March morning as I was leaving for school I found one only a stone's throw down the road from our house. I snatched it, returned and dropped it on a melting snow pile next to the driveway. Come mid-afternoon when I turned onto the driveway, my eyes fell upon a gaggle of a half dozen Turkey Vultures. Their bulky dark masses were hunched in a tight circle, heads down, over an object in the center of the driveway. Heads shot up in unison at the encroaching vehicle. They startled then scrambled. Flapping in mass panic, they lumbered into the air like clumsy dementors. I got out and surveyed what was left of the rabbit that had been dragged off the snow pile. Scraps of hide and pieces of entrails

were strewn about. Clumps of fur wafted across the stone surface. The head had been reduced to a remnant of its original size and shape.

Regarding that rabbit I found while returning one winter afternoon from Mason... My oldest son, Glen, had accompanied me in our van to pick up some large items from a business located there. We had barely started on our way home, driving north on rural Every Road, when I suddenly braked hard. From the passenger seat next to me Glen expressed alarm. "What's the matter?"

I told him we had just passed a good-looking dead rabbit. Since there was no other traffic visible in either direction I put the van in reverse and slowly backed up. The carcass lay directly in front of a mail box at the end of a short driveway of a rural residence. When I slowed to a stop and eyed the rabbit now only a few steps outside my door I looked up to notice an elderly woman walking from the house down the driveway toward the road. I assumed she was coming to get the mail at this very moment. She wore a puzzled and somewhat apprehensive expression as our eyes met, no doubt asking herself why this vehicle had suddenly stopped, backed up and stopped again in front of her at the end of the drive.

When I opened the door and stepped out she froze in her tracks. I strode across the opposing lane, stooped and lifted the rabbit by a hind leg. Her expression morphed into a frown. I faced her, hoisted the rabbit in the air, crowed "*Yum, yum,*" then promptly swiveled, tossed the rabbit into the open door at my son's feet and drove away without looking back.

Glen rolled side to side in his seat with laughter. "Dad, that was mean!" I sheepishly admitted *maybe a little*, and that it had all happened on reflex... but what a great story she'd have to tell.

Still, another rabbit discovery appeared destined for failure given the circumstances that evolved after its acquisition. I stopped for it on the way home from a distant job and pulled the carcass out of the trunk on the driveway amid this winter's day's waning light. I was about to toss it onto the snowbank, but, over rightful concern that a scavenger might again make off with it overnight I decided in the moment to flip it onto the roof of Carol's little Saturn parked next to me.

She would need to leave for work – at a commercial lab in Howell – early the next morning, but I made a mental note to get out and remove it before she left. Unfortunately, the moment I opened the door to the house the bustle of kid activity diverted any further thoughts about it. I never got around to mentioning it to Carol, and further failed to recall it in time before she went out the door the next morning.

When she climbed into the car the eastern sky was beginning to brighten. In this dim light, it so happened, she never noticed the lump on the Saturn's roof over the driver's door. It dawned on me after she had pulled off the driveway, but since this was still a few years prior to the era of ubiquitous cell phones I had no way to get in touch with her until she got to work. Her commute route, a thirty minute drive, largely encompassed an eastbound stretch on I-96 which was especially busy with traffic at that hour.

I assumed there was a good possibility the carcass would merely slip off the car roof once she gained speed. Nope. The phone rang about forty-five minutes after she had left... Interspersed with bursts of laughter on both ends, Carol shared her experience.

Once on the highway, she noticed one driver slow down next to her in the passing lane. He seemed to be rubber-necking at her with an amused smile, then accelerated past. Vehicle after passing vehicle, once alongside the Saturn seemed to linger briefly. Every time she looked to the side, the driver, a passenger or both were staring at her. One passenger pointed at her and the driver leaned forward over the steering wheel for a better look. Both were laughing. She had no idea that only inches over her head a stiff rabbit was frozen fast to the roof, its fur and ears flapping in a steady 75 mph gale.

She entered the employee parking lot and pulled into a spot next to the vehicle of a co-worker who had just parked ahead of her. When Carol opened the car door, the other woman was already out of her vehicle. Standing upright she stared pointedly over the roof of her car at Carol. As she got out and stood, Carol said, "Good morning, Joan," to which Joan replied, "What's that on your car?"

Carol turned, spotted the rabbit and doubled over in a fit of laughter. She guessed immediately and exactly how it had landed there. She ripped it free from the roof like Velcro and dropped it into the trunk.

After surviving that unexpected high speed adventure it looked like we finally had secured our rabbit. I cleaned and prepared it, then added it to the collection which I utilize in hands-on educational lessons (See <http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Feb14.pdf>).

A few weeks later I brought an array of the skulls, including the latest addition, into Montessori Children's House (where I've taught Michigan nature and wildlife lessons as a specialist teacher now for over 33 years) for a lesson comparing and contrasting dentition characteristics across mammal orders. The elementary-aged children were settled in a semi-circle on the carpet in front of me. I showed and discussed each of the skulls then laid them in a row on the empty expanse of carpet inside the arc of students.

At the end of the lesson, they stood to file out of the room. I began to gather the skulls from the carpet to return to the carrying tote. In my right periphery there came a sudden flash of movement. I watched the incident transpire, but my reflexes and even my voice were too slow to ward off the momentum.

A rambunctious boy had decided that, rather than walking around the line of skulls to get to the door, he was going to perform what a Baby Boomer might call an 'Evel Knievel.' He stuck the landing... on you-guessed-it. The crunch that followed could have come from an instantaneously pulverized pile of potato chips. The rabbit skull was obliterated.



Our lucky Eastern Cottontail skull.

Multiple seasons passed before the next 'good' road-killed cottontail presented itself. I gleaned it from the roadside then successfully prepared the skull with no intervening incidents. It has remained intact and in educational use for over a decade now, and counting... knock-on-bone.

-Jim McGrath

Nature Discovery

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*Visit Our
Nature Center
by Appointment
Suggested Minimum
Donation: \$5/person/hr*

The sky's the limit for natural science learning here – with a Michigan twist! Individual adults, couples, individual families and small groups are welcome to schedule a safe, intimate outdoor or indoor visit to what we call “The Biggest Little Nature Center in Michigan,” and “Home to the Largest Zoo of Michigan-native Reptiles and Amphibians.” In fact, the many unique, hands-on experiences here make the experience *better* than a trip to a typical zoo! We will bring snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders out of tanks to interact with adults or children of any age.

Identify and feed “the grand slam of Michigan turtles” - all ten species native to our state! Meet, pet and feed lettuce to “Milberta”, our always hungry Red-footed tortoise.

Handle any or all of the garter snakes and water snakes while learning how to tell them apart, then watch them gobble up worms or live minnows. Hold or “wear” a gentle 6-foot Black Rat Snake – the largest in the state!

Many more snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders to identify and feed. Check out our cabinet full of Michigan mammal skulls and see how many you can identify. Take a guided walk on our trails to identify birds, trees, vines, and invasive plants.



Ask about arranging weekly or monthly visits, or about custom visits and natural science lessons to supplement your student's interests and grade-specific science requirements. We have a wealth of suggestions!

Contact us for more info or to make an appointment.



Lake Erie Birding Day

Saturday, February 25

7am to 4pm

Trumpeter Swan pair. Photo © Steve Sage.

Join an intimately-sized group of adults on this full-day, late-winter excursion. The winter landscapes of Great Lakes shorelines are magnets to a surprising array of Canadian species that call this “South.” Lake Erie is no exception. All three species of swans found in Michigan can often be seen together here over the winter. In addition to scoping a host of diving ducks and other fowl on the open water, we’ll explore adjacent habitats for roosting northern migrant owls, such as Long-eared and Saw-whet. Many other birds in store, too. Stops include Lake Erie Metropark, Point Mouillee State Game Area and other locations along the way. A checklist is provided to allow participants to keep track of species encountered throughout the day. FEE: \$70, includes all transportation. Advance registration required.

“Unadvertised”

Guided Birding Opportunities

Did you know that in addition to offerings posted in our newsletters, on relatively short notice we also schedule and lead more impromptu guided birding outings for adults? These may range from a few hours at a local natural area; to see an unusual bird that has popped up in the vicinity; to a full day or even an overnight birding adventure to farther reaches of the state. If you’d like to be alerted by email or text when such trips arise just ask to be put on our birding participant contact list. We’re likely to have another one this month!

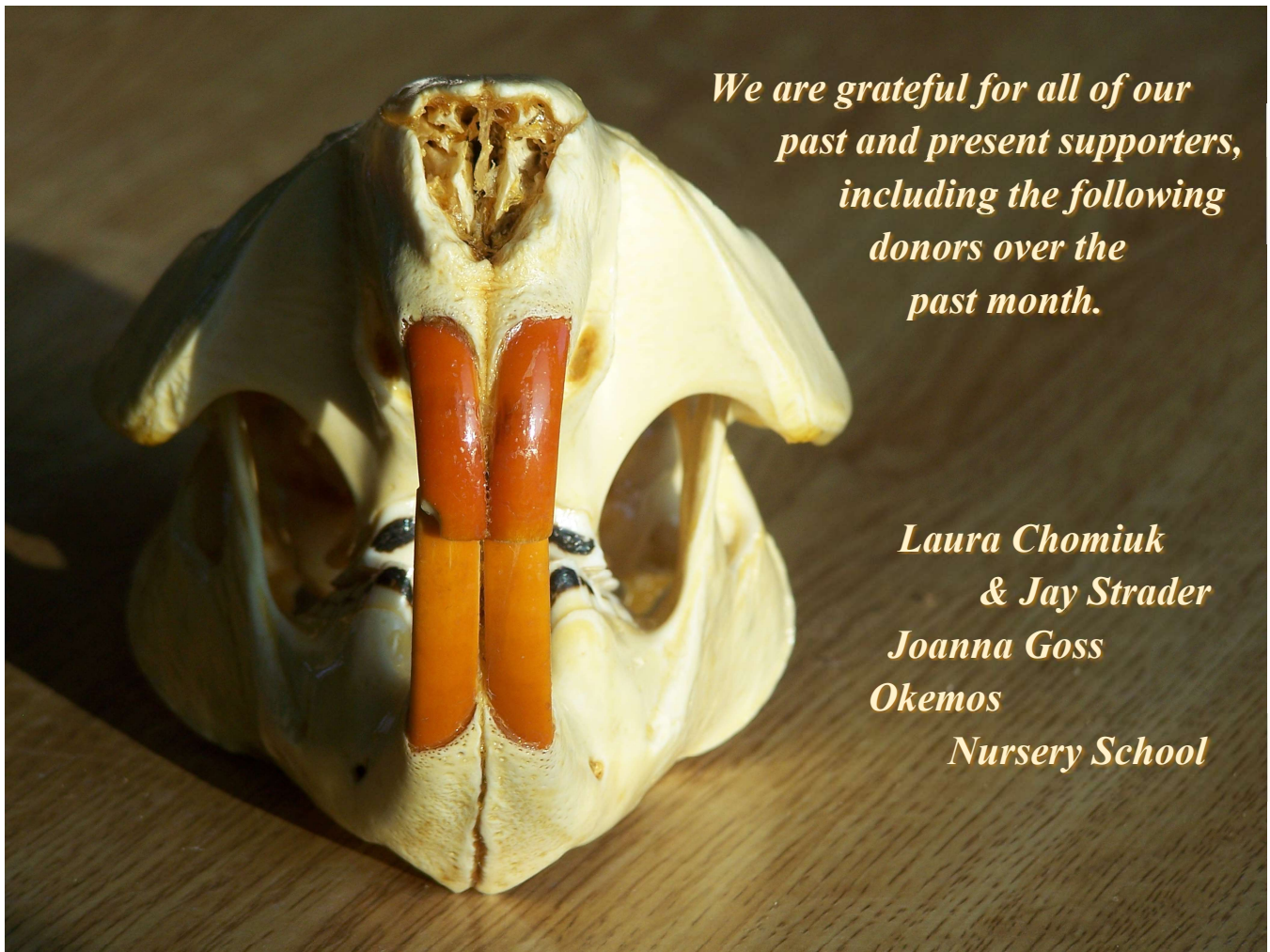


Photo © Steve Sage.



Around the State in February

Thursday, February 16: 6:30-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Bennett Woods Elementary, Okemos.
Tuesday, February 21: 6-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Glencairn Elementary, East Lansing.
Thursday, February 23: 5:30-7:30pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Ralya Elementary, Haslett.
Tuesday, February 28: 6:30-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Marble Elementary, East Lansing.



*We are grateful for all of our
past and present supporters,
including the following
donors over the
past month.*

*Laura Chomiuk
& Jay Strader
Joanna Goss
Okemos
Nursery School*

Go Flight-, Car-, & Meat-free

This is not rocket science. Anyone can learn then act...

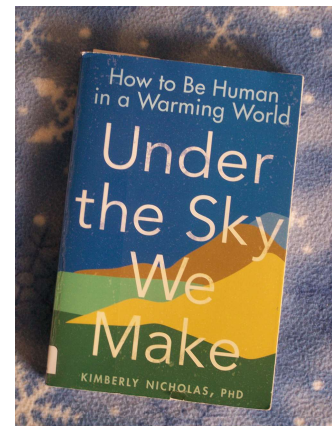
Published in 2021, the book, *Under the Sky We Make: How to be Human in a Warming World*, by global sustainability scientist, Kimberly Nicholas, is still an applicable and a 'must-read' for anyone feeling defeated, disheartened or apathetic about the plight of climate change and ecosystem collapse at humanity's hand. Nicholas plainly lays out how we got here, the science that makes clear what needs to be done, and most importantly, what all of us can and must do right now to slow the process and ultimately turn it around.

Read this interview in *New York Times Magazine* with environmental scientist and author of *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, Robin Wall Kimmerer:

You Don't Have to be Complicit in our Culture of Destruction

https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/01/30/magazine/robin-wall-kimmerer-interview.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20230205&instance_id=84588&nl=the-morning®i_id=97652655&segment_id=124488&te=1&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e

More related reading...



In the Amazon, Indigenous and Locally Controlled Land Stores Carbon, but the Rest of the Rainforest Emits Greenhouse Gases

https://insideclimatenews.org/news/16012023/rainforest-indigenous-peoples-carbon-sink/?utm_source=InsideClimate+News&utm_campaign=b8dbae5dd0-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2023_01_21_05_00&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_29c928ffb5-b8dbae5dd0-327904609

This Guide Can Help You Save Money and Fight Climate Change

https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/climate/tax-breaks-inflation-reduction-act.html?action=click&pgtype=Interactive&state=default&module=style-climate&variant=show®ion=BELOW_MAIN_CONTENT&block=storyline_flex_guide_recirc

-JM

The next generation would be justified in looking back at us and asking, “What were you thinking? Couldn’t you hear what the scientists were saying? Couldn’t you hear what Mother Nature was screaming at you?” - Al Gore

I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act like you would in a crisis. I want you to act like your house is on fire, because it is. - Greta Thunberg

The personal actions that cut climate pollution fast are to go flight-, car-, and meat-free. Start with the one that feels most feasible for you; if you can’t totally go without, aim to cut your consumption today at least in half. – Kimberly Nicholas, Under the Sky We Make

What if we had storytelling mechanisms that said it is important that you know about the well-being of wildlife in your neighborhood? –Robin Wall Kimmerer



Less Beef = Less CO₂
Cowspiracy.com

**Union of
Concerned Scientists**
Science for a healthy planet and safer world



Worldwarzero.com



RSPO.org



Insideclimatenews.org

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