



*A Red-tailed Hawk watches back. Photo by Greg Smith.*

## **THIS ISSUE**

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## ***Roadside ‘Red-tails’ in Winter***

Every serious nature-phile would agree that traveling by foot through a natural landscape allows myriads more opportunities to notice and observe organisms, large and small, than would be possible if, say, you were riding in a fast-moving vehicle. However, that’s not to say that peering out the window at seventy mph doesn’t offer its own special advantages for wildlife-watching.

Mile by rural mile, landscapes and their occupants ride a rapid, relentless conveyor belt past the windshield. Of course, the larger fauna are more evident. Traveling down the interstate you’re apt to see, for instance, far more deer or turkeys per hour - albeit fleetingly - than you’d see while walking, and sometimes a mere few-second gander is all it takes to not only identify wildlife but to catch a glimpse of specific behavioral activity before it vanishes behind you.

Due to the demands of this proprietorship I don’t have as much time to go birding as I’d like. However, every time I get in the car to drive to a local or distant location for a wildlife program I *am* bird-watching, by default.

When our kids were kids we often called out wildlife while rolling down the highway. We encouraged them to keep attentive and do the same. On longer trips, like over the holidays while driving into the Chicago area to visit relatives, we would make a game or competition out of counting Red-tailed Hawks. On one particular trip we finished just short of seventy hawks, over fifty of which were tallied before we reached the Indiana border.

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Regarding birds of prey this large and ubiquitous ‘buteo’ certainly offers the most viewing opportunities for the motorist. Despite its commonality, a random moment of an otherwise humdrum ride on the freeway is made a tad more interesting when my eyes settle on an individual perched on a roadside tree limb, powerline pole or road sign. Although Red-tailed Hawks can readily be seen from this vantage any month of the year, the winter months are the best for observing large numbers in Lower Michigan. Here’s why...

The Red-tail breeds throughout the state. However, as it is a raptor of open spaces, the sprawling farmlands and abundant early successional landscapes perpetuated by human activity in the southern half support a

greater density of breeding pairs. Further north, into Canada and throughout the coniferous forest biome, though, pairs secure breeding home ranges, too. Openings that create opportunities for Red-tails here may occur naturally, due to a past forest fire, or materialize due to farming, logging or other human activity.

To the north, the severity of winters and depth of the snow greatly limits a Red-tail's ability to secure enough sustenance, so it must migrate. In the fall legions of them drift south, some settling in the lower part of the state. Many more keep going to fill suitable land in states further south. Indeed, at our latitude more Red-tails can be viewed occupying the fields, woodland edges and roadsides now than in the summer. With trees devoid of foliage their bulky profiles can be spotted easily by any cognizant observer.

If the perched bird is facing you, its white breast and underside stand out like a large snowball among the drab tree limbs. You will also notice the streaky 'belt' that spans its chest. The streaks are heavier or more pronounced on some individuals than others. Some may appear to lack streaking all together when viewed from a distance. Nevertheless, it is a more reliable field mark for the species than the tail is assumed to be, the underside of which is much duller and does not stand out, especially on overcast days, in shadow, or in otherwise dim light. The tail of a first-year Red-tail isn't *any* shade of red, but a dull grayish brown with thin transverse bands.

If the perched bird's back is to you, note the smattering of white splotches against the brown mantle. In many birds viewed at the right angle the spots create a fairly large V-shaped pattern.

On sunny days Red-tails spend more time in the air taking advantage of the thermals as they circle above the paved ribbons of the interstate. Again, sometimes the color of the tail can be hard to detect because of distance or glare from the sun, but a lesser-known characteristic to non-birders is fairly easy to discern when you know to look for it. On the leading edge of the wings on each side of the head appears a dark segment or thin bar that ends before the mid-wing joint. Termed the *patagium*, it stands out easily in contrast to the light wing feathers behind it. No other North American hawk sports this field mark in flight.

Winter's influx of migrators presents more opportunities to see these birds in action. As you pass a perched hawk, a few-second viewing window may be all the time you need to see it drop from its perch, extend its talons, and collide with an unseen small target in the overgrowth near the shoulder.



*On a soaring Red-tailed Hawk note the dark patagium on the leading wing edge on each side of the head. Photo by Carolyn Malmstrom.*

Barring inclement weather regular roadside Red-tails can be anticipated and enjoyed by any commuter all through the winter months, but from my perspective February may be the pinnacle. Increasing daylight triggers the onset of courtship activity in the local pairs.

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When hunting for prey even members of a mated pair choose to spread out. When you see one perched, then a second just one or two tenths of a mile further down the highway it is a good chance you spotted both members of the pair. As the month progresses the pair's bond starts to strengthen in anticipation of breeding season. Start watching now for members spending increasing amounts of time in close proximity, often sharing a limb like a loveseat.

Through the windshield you may eventually strike the ideal instant in which a male with a meadow vole in his talons alights next to his perched mate. Coincidentally close to Valentine's Day, he bestows and she accepts the gift as if it were a box of chocolates.



*Watch for Red-tailed Hawks perched closely together in late winter as the pair bond strengthens. Photo by Greg Smith.*

You might see the pair courting in the air, as well. The birds may glide in overlapping circles against a blue backdrop over the highway. They definitely appear more interested in each other than in anything going on below. The male performs steep dives toward the female. She tilts abruptly in response to his feigned attack. The birds pass each other closely and repeatedly amid nimble swoops, sharp turns, hard banks and body rolls that expresses nothing short of *joie de vivre* to the ground-bound observer.

Red-tailed Hawk pairs often use the same nest for multiple years. They may ignore it through fall and early winter, but come February one or both members of a pair begin to visit and inspect it with increased frequency. Watch for bulky nests about three feet in diameter, made of sticks in woodlots and tree lines on the sides of highways, then pay attention for activity as the month advances. You may spot one on its way to the nest with a large stick in its talons. They often repair or augment it in preparation for the actual task of egg-laying and incubation come March.

Scan for these big, bulky stick nests in roadside woodlots for another reason; Great Horned Owls nest in them, and most females in Lower Michigan are already sitting on eggs by mid-month. Some nests are sufficiently close to the road that a passerby can spot the telltale, wide ‘horned’ head poking up from its surface.

Since they begin the nesting cycle a month earlier than Red-tails, Great Horneds often commandeer a hawk’s nest overnight when they are unable to guard it. Of course, the pair does not dare mess with an incubating Great Horned. They’d rather get to work on a fresh nest, perhaps in the next woodlot over.

With heightened awareness of Red-tailed Hawks on your trip you prime yourself for sightings of still so many other birds including less common or more sporadically-sighted raptors: an occasional perched hawk turns out to not be a Red-tail, but maybe a slightly smaller Red-shouldered Hawk at the edge of a woodland; or, in open spaces, a Rough-legged Hawk visiting from the edge of the tundra; or a diminutive American Kestrel perched on a wire or hovering in place over a potential meal; or an active Cooper’s Hawk flapping across the lanes with short, powerful wingbeats; or a Bald Eagle circling a short distance from the Red-tail that’s doing the same.

Additionally, turkeys, waterfowl, swans, cranes, and soon, migratory vultures are easy to spot while you’re on the move. All you need is the awareness to look. For the back-seat child it’s a worthwhile and *real* alternative to screens.



*The crow-sized Pileated Woodpecker has grown increasingly common in Lower Michigan. Watch for the big white wing patches as one traverses the highway between woodlots. Photo by Greg Smith.*

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Now, you know somebody reading this is going to bring it up... Aren’t you advocating another form of ‘distracted driving?’

The countless sources of driver distraction are hardly equal in effect. Generally, distractions within the car are more dangerous than those outside the windshield. Look at how roadside billboards - an American staple for better or worse - are tolerated and encouraged, often so others can profit through planned



motorist distraction. Although it has surely happened, I've never heard a driver claim that they rear-ended the car in front of them because they were distracted by a billboard.

I've also never heard 'distracted by a bird' as the reason for an accident. Your gaze still remains up and out the windshield where it belongs. A little 'roving bird-eye' is not a significant road threat, but it sure is engaging, which is the whole point of *this* planned distraction!

Are you heading out on a highway commute today? See how long it takes you (driver or passenger) to spot a Red-tailed Hawk. My guess is... it won't be long.

-Jim McGrath



Trumpeter Swan pair. Photo by Steve Sage.

## *Lake Erie Birding Day Saturday, February 24 7am to 4pm*

Join an intimately-sized group of only 5 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 owls. Many other birds in store, too, including the early migrant blackbirds and other songbirds. Stops include Lake Erie Metropark, Point Mouillee State Game Area and other locations. A checklist is provided to allow participants to keep track of species encountered throughout the day. FEE: \$70, includes all transportation. Advance registration required.

## *Around the State in February*



**Wednesday, February 7: 6-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Glencairn Elementary, East Lansing.**

**Saturday, February 10: 10am. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Presentation; West Bloomfield Parks & Recreation.**

**Wednesday, February 21: 6:30-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Bennett Woods Elementary, Okemos.**

**Thursday, February 22: 6:30-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Marble Elementary, East Lansing.**

**Thursday, February 29: 5:30-7:30pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Ralya Elementary, Haslett.**

# Nature Discovery

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*We're currently keeping a voracious Short-tailed Shrew.*

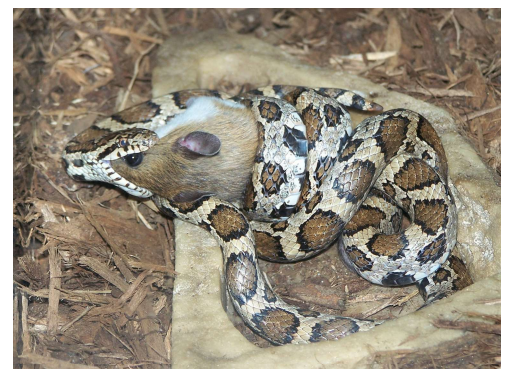
***Visit Our  
Nature Center  
by Appointment  
Suggested Minimum  
Donation: \$5/person/hr***

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. Feed crickets to our voracious Short-tailed Shrew. Ask to watch one of our snakes constrict and eat a mouse!



*Our Eastern Milk Snake constricts and prepares to swallow a Deer Mouse.*

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 studies and interests. We have a wealth of suggestions!

Contact us for more info or to make an appointment.



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



*Alex Johnson  
Okemos Nursery School  
Mary Lou Turnbull*

*Clockwise from upper right:  
Eastern Mole, Short-tailed Shrew,  
Masked Shrew, Meadow Vole, Deer Mouse*

## ***Rethink then Abort Carbon-Heavy Habits***

We washed and then dried two full loads of laundry on the clothesline (that we absolutely love, btw) in succession today. The second load was completely dry and ready to fold by 2pm. The statement would be unremarkable except for this qualifier: It's February 9! Once unfathomable, winter clothesline drying is becoming an increasingly regular thing in our yard now.

We donated our electric clothes dryer to Habitat for Humanity nearly 25 years ago and have not owned one since. When it is too cold or wet we simply dry it on clothes racks overnight. We feel great about reducing this aspect of our carbon footprint to zero. The savings on our electric bill is secondary to our concern for 'life as we know it.' Now how to rouse the complacency of the masses...



<https://earth911.com/home-garden/reducing-washer-and-dryer-environmental-impacts/>

More for your perusal...

[https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/17/opinion/temperature-climate-change-heat.html?campaign\\_id=39&emc=edit\\_ty\\_20240118&instance\\_id=112817&nl=opinion-today&regi\\_id=97652655&segment\\_id=155636&te=1&user\\_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/17/opinion/temperature-climate-change-heat.html?campaign_id=39&emc=edit_ty_20240118&instance_id=112817&nl=opinion-today&regi_id=97652655&segment_id=155636&te=1&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e)

[https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/30/opinion/wolves-repopulation-colorado-polarization.html?campaign\\_id=39&emc=edit\\_ty\\_20240201&instance\\_id=114034&nl=opinion-today&regi\\_id=97652655&segment\\_id=156996&te=1&user\\_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/30/opinion/wolves-repopulation-colorado-polarization.html?campaign_id=39&emc=edit_ty_20240201&instance_id=114034&nl=opinion-today&regi_id=97652655&segment_id=156996&te=1&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e)

-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 CO<sub>2</sub>  
Cowspiracy.com

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



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RSPO.org



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