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Start Your Own Michigan “Big Year” in 2012



It's a good winter for seeing Snowy Owls in Lower Michigan. We saw this one near Muskegon.

In 2011, *The Big Year* hit the big screen. The movie is loosely based on the popular book, *The Big Year: A Tale of Man, Nature and Fowl Obsession*, by Mark Obmascik. The true story chronicles an ultra-avid birder's quest to set the North American record for the most species seen in a single calendar year, and competitors who are gunning for the same fame. Despite the combined comedic presence of Jack Black, Steve Martin and Owen Wilson, reviews from critics and birders alike were tepid, and it was a box-office disappointment. However, the movie left a significant impression on many viewers who had no previous knowledge about the activity of birding. It looked like fun.

Of course, to even consider the madness of going for such a record requires top-notch identification skills, and ready access to a crap load of time, mobility, and, oh yeah, money. Thus, many more grounded birders focus on the quest to seek bird diversity simply for love of the natural world or as an added incentive to get outdoors. It's about getting into the field to encounter the most birds, not more birds than the other guy. For anyone who hasn't tried it, it *is* fun, but be careful. It can become addictive.

Record-keeping and list-making are part of being human. Some birders keep a "life list" of species encountered and identified. Some keep other records. I always keep a day list when I bird alone or while leading a group. I also maintain a list of species encountered on our six acres north of Williamston. (After 23 years, the count stands at 137.)

Would you like to make a personal commitment to get outside more often, or to get more in touch with the natural world in 2012? Here's a very manageable listing-twist. How many species of birds can you personally encounter and identify in a single calendar year? We're not talking about setting world records like the Big Year birders. It's rather about expanding your personal life experience on your terms - your income, your mobility, your time. Call it your Michigan Big Year. How many species can you encounter in the Great Lakes State in 2012?

If you start visiting habitats beyond the backyard with some regularity, you can easily blow past 100 species half way through spring. By year's end, 200 species is very attainable to most any serious birder. If you really get bitten by the birding bug and want to go for the gusto, most states do have an individual year- record documented. For Michigan, it is just over 300 species.

You can bolster your state-year list with some impressive entries via regular checks on the internet. The most unusual birds seen around the state are posted daily on a list serve called “Mich-listers,” complete with exact location and other useable details for anyone who wants to pursue them. There are many local list serves where birders in a specific area post what birds they are seeing. For the Lansing area, look up “Mid-mich birds.”

This year, Nature Discovery is going to regularly offer a combination of guided half-day trips, day trips and even a couple of several-day trips through all seasons in the quest to help participants experience as much bird diversity as possible in 2012. It’s largely meant for adults, but teens are welcome to attend without an accompanying adult, and a younger child may attend if accompanied by a parent or other responsible adult. A maximum of only five participants fits comfortably in our mini-van. The small group experience makes every outing a personable one. We will supply a *Michigan Birds* checklist to make your listing and record-keeping especially convenient.

We’re going after winter owls and more in the coming weeks. Check out our Sunday, January 8 program and Saturday, January 14 field trip in this issue.

-Jim McGrath



Long-eared Owls are often found over the winter at Lake Erie Metropark. Photo © Steve Sage

Open Hours

Sunday, January 8

1 to 5pm; \$5 admission

2pm Presentation

Finding Owls in Winter

There are more owls to be seen in Lower Michigan in the winter than at any other time of the year. In addition to our permanent resident Great-horned, Barred and Screech owls, a number of Canadian species like Snowy, Short-eared, Long-eared, and Saw-whet owls wander southward in the winter in search of small mammal prey. This winter appears to be an especially good year! While viewing beautiful Powerpoint images, learn about the identification, behavior and vocalizations of each, as well as where and how to find them in Lower Michigan. Participants may have an opportunity to go on a short trip to view wild Short-eared Owls after the presentation.

Interact with our huge zoo of Michigan snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders before, during, or after the presentation. Our knowledgeable staff is always on hand to help visitors of all ages make the most of their visit! Refreshments available, too!

Lake Erie

Guided Birding Day

Saturday, January 14

7am to 4:30pm

Start your Michigan Big Year (see opening essay) with a bang. The winter landscapes of our Great Lakes shorelines are strong magnets to a surprising array of Canadian species that call Lower Michigan “South.” Lake Erie is no exception. In addition to viewing loons and diving ducks on the open water through our spotting scope, we’ll explore adjacent habitats for roosting northern migrant owls, such as Long-eared and Saw-whet. Many other birds are always in store, too. Birding stops include Lake Erie Metropark, Point Mouillee State Game Area and other locations along the way dependent on latest internet reports. A Michigan Birds checklist is provided to allow participants to keep track of species encountered throughout the day. Dress warmly, bring binoculars, and pack lunch and snacks to last through the trip’s duration. Depart 7am; return about 4:30pm.

Enrollment requirements: Adult. A teen may attend without a supervising adult. Children younger than teenage must be accompanied by an adult. Maximum enrollment: 5. Advance registration required. FEE: \$50, includes all transportation to and from Nature Discovery.



Beautiful Long-tailed Ducks fly south from the Arctic Circle to spend the winter months on the open water of Lake Erie and the other Great Lakes. Winter-hardy birders can view them by the thousands. Photo © Steve Sage



A Screech-owl responds to our recording.

Owling Night Encore

Friday, January 20, 7-9pm

By demand, we’re scheduling another night with the owls. Join us for a Powerpoint presentation over hot beverages and cookies. ***Michigan Owls Up Close*** features all ten species found in the state, and one more that’s now considered extinct here. Learn identification tips and vocalizations in addition to where, when and how to find them throughout the state. 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! Not recommended for preschool children. Limit 10 participants. Enroll in advance by email or phone. COST: \$10/person.

BY APPOINTMENT - Do you have a small group (family, friends, scouts) who would like to do this (or anything else we offer) but can’t make the date? Contact us about arranging a special date!



Horned Larks gather with Snow Buntings in large flocks on agricultural lands in the winter. Photo © Steve Sage

Guided Lansing Area Birding

*Monday, January 23
7am to Noon*

Join an intimate group of only 5 adult participants on a guided trip in our minivan to a few prime Lansing-area birding locations. We'll head north to Maple River State Game Area in search of eagles, shrikes, snow buntings and more, then bird around Lansing, including Potter Park, Moores Park, Cooley Gardens and other stops. Specialty birds are commonly found at each of these locations, too, including Peregrine Falcons, which call the power plant across the river from Moores Park home. Participants will be given bird checklists to keep track of the day's finds. If time allows, we'll finish the morning reviewing our lists over hot beverages at a local coffee shop. Advanced (limited) enrollment required. FEE: \$25/person.

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