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Winter Bird Feeding Yields Rewards Every Day

Our family enjoys the near-constant winter activity at our two bird feeding stations immensely. In fact, many visitors to our facility can't help but comment on the attention-grabbing action outside the window.

Every day this time of year the view is a veritable treat – more so with a blanket of snow on the ground. On several occasions this past week, over one hundred birds at once have been in view from the dining room table. Up to twenty species will visit over the course of a day. We have another, less elaborate set-up just outside our nature classroom windows. The deliberately close positioning of the feeders tremendously enhances the viewing and offers intimate looks at plumage and behavior. In fact, the barrier of the window is all that keeps us from being able to reach out and touch some of them.

Several times throughout any day, the feeding will be dramatically interrupted by the sudden attack from a first-year Cooper's Hawk. Birds scatter in a flush of wings as a crow-sized, brown-and-white missile flashes past the window, then is gone. Several minutes later, the songbirds are back as if their lives were never in danger.

Over several weeks, we have yet to see the young Cooper's Hawk snatch a bird in front of the window, but the fact that it is still alive evinces the securing of hard-earned meals elsewhere. On occasion, the assailant will see the juncos, finches and cardinals dive for the deep cover of the juniper bushes bordering the house next to the feeders. It will then alight on the ground and pace around the perimeter with a chicken-like gait, neck craned, head twisting, and keen eyes searching for any telltale movement within the spiny blue-green wall. If it spies movement, it burrows into the hedge and attempts to ferret-out the prey. From our perspective inside the pane the hidden hawk's progress is noted by an advancement of quivering branches along the length of the hedge, then, the sudden burst of a small bird from its depths zigzagging through the open air to some distant cover.



A first-year Cooper's Hawk takes a break on the log platform feeder outside our window after a failed attempt to catch a songbird.

When the hawk inevitably decides to abandon the foray, it will often emerge from the junipers, hop onto the elevated log that acts as a feeding platform directly in front of the window and begin to preen its feathers in a state of rest. While we marvel at its beauty, we have to be careful to do so in a furtive manner. Unlike the abundant seed-eaters, who seem to instinctively know that we are no threat to them inside the pane, the hawk will disappear in an instant if it detects our slightest movement.



A first-year Yellow-bellied Sapsucker eyes the camera through the window with caution.

Regular scans among the daily regulars that devour our sunflower, thistle, corn, and mixed seed inevitably yield a pleasant surprise in a less-common winter visitor, like a White-throated Sparrow, a Purple Finch, a Carolina Wren or a Brown Creeper. These birds are only noted a handful of times through the entire winter. Once or twice per winter the discovery of an *especially* rare visitor is noteworthy enough to report on the internet.

We've had two of them so far through this cold season. In mid-November a male Evening Grosbeak, a northern species that rarely roams this far south in the state, and which some describe as looking like a goldfinch on steroids, popped up at our sunflower bin for only a few seconds worth of excitement, never to be seen again.

The latest rarity first made an appearance at our suet feeder last week, and has been visiting multiple times a day ever since: a first-year Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. This northern woodpecker is a migrant. Nearly the entire population migrates out of the state to warmer climates over the winter. The closeness of the feeder to the window has allowed for terrific photo ops.

“Mid-michbirds” is a free listserv on which birdwatchers in Mid-Michigan post their sightings - especially more noteworthy ones. Area birder, Jeff Pavlik, keeps records of all reports on the listserv as well as any other reports for Ingham County. For the perusal of listserv members, he attaches monthly spreadsheets of all species reported in the county. Ours has been the sole record of a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker in Ingham County so far this winter!

Want a chance to see it? Pay us a visit, and, with a bit of lucky timing you may get to view the bird up-close. Check out next Sunday's program, *Michigan Woodpeckers*, where we will familiarize participants with all nine species that reside in the state. We'll then view and identify them at our feeders and visit a nearby location where impressive, crow-sized Pileated Woodpeckers are regularly encountered.

-Jim McGrath



Catch Nature Discovery on WLNZ Radio's Coffee Break on January 29

Jim is scheduled to appear this month on Tuesday, January 29 at 9:15am, talking about Michigan owls. 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.



Meet Michigan's Woodpeckers

**Sunday, January 13
at 2pm**

**Doors open from 1 to 5pm
Admission: \$5/person**

Especially in the winter, woodpeckers of several species line up to feed at our two suet cages. Like many other pecking orders, this diminutive male Downy Woodpecker is content to wait until the female Northern Flicker has had her fill.

Join us for **Meet Michigan's Woodpeckers**, a Powerpoint presentation featuring all nine species of woodpeckers found throughout the state. Learn how to identify them by sight and by call in addition to interesting aspects of

their anatomy, behavior and ecology. Find out which species to expect at your suet feeder and in your neighborhood, as well as where to go in the state to encounter the others. Following the presentation, we'll identify the woodpeckers visiting our feeders just outside the window as well as other species. Participants may even get a chance to view a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. An individual of this uncommon winter visitor has been frequenting our suet feeders for over a week now. We'll step outside and attempt to attract various species by playing their calls on our "birdpod." There will also be opportunity to carpool to a nearby neighbor's woodlot to see if we can get a glimpse of one of their huge resident Pileated Woodpeckers, which we will also attempt to draw-in with audio recordings. Don't forget binoculars!

Doors are open from 1 to 5pm. Visit and interact with any or all of the animals in our huge zoo of native Michigan snakes, turtles, frogs, and salamanders. Take a guided walk on the trail. Our staff is always on hand to help visitors of all ages make the most of their time here.

This first-year Yellow-bellied Sapsucker has been visiting our suet feeders multiple times a day since December 30. Note the nearly perfect match between its patterned back and the color of the surrounding tree stump.



OUR EMAIL ADDRESS IS CHANGING

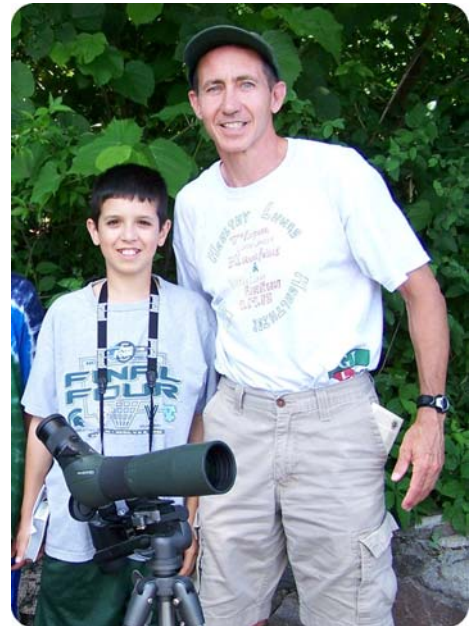
**Please update our contact information in your e-address book to naturedisc87@gmail.com.
As of January 31, our cablespeed email address will be discontinued.**

Father & Son Share Years of Experience through Nature Discovery

When my now 14-year old son, William, was five or six I took him to the Brighton Library for a presentation by a naturalist that my mother-in-law had read about in the local (Milford) paper. It was a cold, dark, rainy, fall school night, and it would have been easy to stay home, especially since William was harboring a cold. But for some reason we made our way to Brighton that night, and that seemingly benign decision has made a huge impact on both William and me. It all started with a large snapping turtle wandering harmlessly through a small gathering of curious people in a local library. It has led to our eyes being opened to what we are all missing in our own back yards.

Here is a severely truncated version of our experiences with Jim:

- One or more nature camps every summer since then for my son. Bird camps, herpetology camp, entomology camp.
- Rushing to many specific habitats in Mid-Michigan to view (and hear) 80-90 different species of birds.
- "Mucking" up to our knees in a pond in the dark to capture and study the incredibly diverse creatures of a vernal pond.
- Standing outside on a cold, quiet winter night admiring and listening to the soft whispers of Screech Owls.
- Endless bird lists - day list, week list, year list, life list.
- Knowing when and where you were when you saw your first (or only) species. Our first Pileated Woodpecker showed up at William's first camp, Young Naturalist Camp, fittingly on the birding day. Cerulean Warbler, Prothonotary Warbler, Dickcissel, Eurasian Wigeon. All life birds, that we never knew existed 5-10 years ago.
- Inspiring our family to tack on a birding outing whenever we are in a new area/habitat.
- "If you plant it, they will come" - planting a thorny shrub, Prickly Ash, drew in countless Giant Swallowtail Butterflies. Being awakened to the concept of why native plants are so critical to all of these life cycles.
- Raising caterpillars of all four giant silk moths, from egg to moth, and around again. Experiencing the circle of life, and the food chain.
- "Always be open" - Setting up a respectable wild bird feeding station, and then, counting over 40 different species of birds, most of them right out our kitchen window, this past fall during migration time.
- Birding by ear - learning how to appreciate the variety of calls, and picking out specific birds in the morning symphony. I saw my first Scarlet Tanager by hearing it during a morning run, recognizing it ("Robin with a sore throat"), and going back to find it.
- Light bulb moments - when your child's eyes light up with an idea, after a unique nature experience with Jim. William has had a thousand of them, which has filled our house and yard with bird books, native plants, insect collections, etc.



Matthew Burke and his son, William, enjoy a Nature Discovery birding camp.

Jim's mantra is that if he can get people to realize and appreciate all of the nature that is out there, and eliminate the fear and ignorance about some of the stereotypes (eg. snakes, spiders), then people will care. He has inspired us to turn off the electronics and take a walk. There is no end to what we have discovered since that night at the Brighton Library.

-William & Matthew Burke



Michigan Owls & “Owling”

Wednesday, January 23 or 30, 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.

Climate Change Realist

On the heels last month’s recommendation of the PBS Frontline program, *Climate of Doubt* (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/climate-of-doubt/>), as mandatory viewing, my brother emailed me a link to a *New York Times* item and an associated link listed by op-ed columnist, Mark Bittman. Exactly who are the pushers of the climate change denial machine? The names, as well as their profit-driven motives, are outlined here:

<http://bittman.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/05/unseasonably-warm-winter-links/>

<http://truth-out.org/news/item/13083-meet-the-climate-denial-machine#.UMnfS7V3Uc0.email>

Finally, Nature Discovery employee, Marietta, called me to be sure I caught an episode of *Bill Moyer’s & Company*, on PBS. This is a terrific, thoughtful conversation between Moyers and climate change communication expert, Anthony Leiserowitz: <http://billmoyers.com/episode/full-show-ending-the-silence-on-climate-change/>. Again, mandatory reading and viewing for every American.

Beyond acknowledgement of the situation, the next step for each individual, no matter what your walk-of-life, is to do anything to incrementally reduce personal carbon emissions. It’s impossible to function in our society today without some fossil fuel emissions, but we should be ever-vigilant for opportunities to reduce our individual carbon footprint in every aspect of our lives – and there are lots of them. Last winter, we’ve added extra insulation to the walls and ceilings of our old house. This winter (in fact, starting next week) we’re quitting our oil-fueled furnace and signing a contract with Doty Mechanical, of Lansing, to begin installation on a new geothermal heating system. We’d like to invite anyone with an interest to come out in the next couple of weeks to see, firsthand, how it’s done. Just contact us!

Become a fan of *Nature Discovery* on Facebook!

Check out our Youtube channel, *Wild Williamston*, too!

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