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Despite associated hardship, the recent stretch of inclement weather has created feeder-bird-watching at its best.

A Milestone Issue

This marks our milestone 50th issue of *The Wild Times*. Dating back to December, 2009, we've composed just over four years of uninterrupted monthly newsletters. Each one, averaging 5-6 pages of copy and photos, takes about 15-18 hours to complete.

By far, the composition of an original opening essay takes the most time and mental energy. We always aim for these essays to contain information that is useable to the reader - and often, timely in relation to



American Goldfinches mobbed our screen-tube thistle feeder, just inches outside the window, all day through the snowstorm. Feeding birds is one simple way to increase natural diversity awareness.

the season or to the state of the environment on which we depend. While the formulation and dissemination of these essays in no direct way translates to income for our modest home-based business, regular feedback from readers lets us know that, unlike many newsletters that are put on the back burner to be read later (or not), ours are read and appreciated by readers who are impressed enough to take the time to let us know. We encourage anyone who missed past newsletters to visit our website and take a gander. They're all there with opening essays that allow the reader to understand who we are and what drives us to teach.

Our mission statement explains Nature Discovery's inception and purpose: ... *dedicated to enhancing awareness of, and sensitivity toward Michigan's diverse living resources through natural science education.* Put another way, we've made it our job to get people to recognize and understand natural diversity where we live. We've noticed that people who recognize it can't help but value it. Valuing then leads to a desire to protect and preserve it.

Take up the study of natural diversity, including experiential immersion, and you'll find a source of fascination that lasts a

lifetime! Natural topics that, at a precursory glance, seem like they couldn't be very interesting (like sparrows, in this issue) become viewed as so much more upon closer inspection. In the process, like knowing each piece of a grand jigsaw puzzle, one becomes increasingly familiar with the intricate and amazing ecology - the big picture - inherent in the interacting sum of the parts. Along with gained intimacy comes a strong sense that this is the way our world evolved, and this is the way it is supposed to be. However, our increasingly anthropocentric society appears to be losing the ability to acknowledge the breadth of the living planet beyond its own immediate interests. Thus, it continues to march as an indifferent, accelerating force against this diversity.

How to change it? Formal, mainstream education. Classes that highlight natural diversity should be taught in public schools every year, K through twelve. The Michigan puzzle alone is huge! However, this glaring absence in the curriculum sends an unspoken message to each and every one of tomorrow's adults. Natural diversity must not be important. If you want to become educated in natural diversity today you are going to have to attain it through your own volition. That's where we can help, and we've got a lot to offer!

May we suggest a resolution for 2014? Do not ignore natural diversity, and do not take it for granted. (Anybody notice the population crash of Monarchs this summer?) Nature Discovery exists to assist anyone, any age in this endeavor. Attend as many of our monthly Sunday programs as you can, or drop in by special appointment. Join us for an evening of owling. Attend a birding field trip specifically for adults. Catch our monthly interview on WLNZ Radio's *Coffee Break*. Sign your children up for our day camps or field trips. Schedule us to present in your children's school, or, better yet, consider enrolling them at Montessori Children's House, Stepping Stones Montessori, or Okemos Nursery School, where our weekly, Michigan-specific natural science lessons are soaked-up and remembered by enthusiastic young minds. Contact any of the schools and they'll gladly arrange a tour!

-Jim McGrath



Our hatchling Blue Racer downs a spring peeper. By the end of its first year the spots will have faded and it will take on the beautiful, smooth, blue hue of an adult. A bluish sheen is already more apparent now than in September. Once common in Mid-Michigan, persecution and habitat loss have landed this impressive, but harmless, snake on a long list of examples of local natural diversity loss.



Michigan Owls & "Owling"

Friday, January 10, 7 to 9 pm

The evening begins with a Powerpoint presentation over hot beverages and a snack. *Michigan Owls Up Close* features all 10 species found in the state, plus 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. Advance enrollment required. Contact us to make a reservation. Not recommended for young

children. Do you have a small group of family / friends? Make your own special appointment with us!



© Steve Sage

Savannah Sparrow.

Photo © Steve Sage.

A Powerpoint Field Guide to Michigan Sparrows

Sunday, January 12

Doors Open 1 to 5pm. Admission: \$5/person

On Sunday, January 12, at 2pm join us for the presentation, *A Powerpoint Field Guide to Michigan Sparrows*.

For most of us the word “sparrow” conjures fuzzy images of some drab, nondescript, insignificant bird. For others it may be a shortened term for the ubiquitous House Sparrow, found around dwellings in practically every city, town and country lot. In fact, Michigan is home at least part of the year to nearly twenty native species of sparrows, from the common backyard Song Sparrow to the boldly-patterned White-throated Sparrow, to the little-known and increasingly rare Henslow’s Sparrow. The misnamed House Sparrow, is not a sparrow at all. It is the non-native English Weaver Finch - a member of a completely different bird family than the true sparrows. Also, the House Sparrow’s call is comprised of little more than monotonous, incessant cheeps, while the breeding songs of our native North American sparrows are as beautiful as they are varied.

In this 90-minute presentation beautiful color images and rich audio recordings are used to help all participants get to better know and appreciate Michigan’s diverse world of sparrows as well as where and when to go – locally and across the state – to find them.

Although most of our native sparrows are feathered in muted shades of brown, each species can be told from the next quite easily by recognition of one or two field marks. Additionally, when range, habitat, seasonality and song are considered, identification becomes a cinch!

The life history of the introduced House Sparrow will also be presented, including details of the damaging effect it has on bluebird (and other native songbird) nesting success, in addition to other factors that contribute to its federal status as a noxious pest.



The beautiful White-crowned Sparrow migrates through Lower Michigan over a couple of weeks in May. Its distinctive song can be heard in backyards only for this short period of time as it passes through.

Photo © Steve Sage.

Come early or stay late to visit and interact with creatures from our huge zoo of Michigan reptiles & amphibians. Handle snakes. Feed turtles, frogs and salamanders. Ask for a guided walk on the snowy trails. Our knowledgeable staff is on hand to help visitors of all ages make the most of their visit.

Catch Nature Discovery on Coffee Break Thursday, January 16

Jim is scheduled to appear on Thursday, January 16 at 9:30am, showing and discussing skulls of various Michigan mammals. 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 post a reminder on our Facebook fan page.



Small Squirrel Skull Preservation

Thursdays, January 16 & 23, 4-6pm

Recommended for 9 yrs & older.

NOT for the squeamish! An introductory lesson about characteristics of mammal skulls kicks-off the activity, then the young biologists are given a freshly-boiled small squirrel head and the utensils required to carefully tear

away all the flesh. After a bleaching bath and polyurethane treatment the finished specimen, worthy of a museum case, is ready to take home for display on bureau or hearth!

\$50/student. Call or email to reserve a spot. Enrollment is limited to 5.

NOTE: For parental convenience, arrangements can be made for Jim to pick your student up after school at Montessori Children's House or at Stepping Stones Montessori in East Lansing and drive him/her directly to Nature Discovery.

Lake Erie Birding Day

Saturday, January 18

7am to 5pm

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 diving ducks and other fowl 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. Depart 7am; return about 5pm.



Long-tailed Duck.

Photo © Steve Sage.

Enrollment requirements: Adult. A teen may attend without a supervising adult. Maximum enrollment: 5. Advance registration required. FEE: \$65, includes all transportation to and from Nature Discovery.

CCR – “Look Ma, No Gas!”

In light of our 50th issue, and assuming many readers may not be aware of the circumstances that prompted a regular column that focuses on the threat posed by man-made climate change, here are links to two issues from spring and summer of 2012, with essays entitled *Vernal Ponds and Coal Mines* and *Say Hello to the Elephant in the Room*, composed just prior to its start-up.

<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Apr12.pdf>

<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Aug%202012.pdf>

Our family is not expecting the world to change by our drop-in-the-bucket efforts to reduce our personal carbon footprints, but reducing green houses gases on a global scale needs to start at a personal level. Be mindful of fossil fuel consumption in everything you do. Our society is so reliant on easy energy in every facet of our lives that we barely realize opportunities for alternatives. For instance, the gas-powered leaf-blower screams “energy-waster” to me. Pick up a rake! In case energy-saving isn’t enough incentive... it’s much cheaper to operate, and you could definitely use the exercise.

A few hours into the morning that it rained tree limbs the air around our neighborhood was abuzz with the sound of chainsaws. We left ours in the garage and grabbed the limb-saw instead. I just replaced the blade. No kidding... it cuts through a six-inch limb almost like a knife through butter. The multiple-trunked top of a downed tree stretched across our circular drive. Several more jutted into the street partially blocking the road. My son and I handled the entire cutting job with the limb-saw then dragged the pieces into an out-of-the-way pile – and it didn’t take very long. Enjoyed a good healthy sweat, too.

Same for The Big New Year Snow. Rotating members of our household went crazy with the shovels every six hours or so over the past 48. Good workouts, no gas.

Understandably, not everyone is physically capable to perform these tasks. When we reach that stage we’ll keep our eyes open for still another alternative to the fossil fuel route - like a local teenager who could use a few extra bucks.



PUT A BABY FOX SNAKE INTO YOUR EDUCATIONAL SETTING!

We’ll give a first-year, Michigan-native Western Fox Snake, along with all the care support you need, to any educational institution that uses our services. It’s a low-maintenance, highly-handleable classroom mascot! We can even supply you with discount frozen pinkie mice. Two per week are all it needs. Contact us for details...

A few of our four-month-old fox snakes bask under their light. Each currently measures about 12 inches in length. Within a few years they will grow into gentle adults nearly five feet in length.

Become a fan of *Nature Discovery* on Facebook!



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