

THIS ISSUE

Guided Winter Birding by Appointment

UP Birding Weekend, January 13-15

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Consider the Earth in 2024

Do You Hear What I Hear? **My Three-Owl Christmas**

What with the fact that most owls are nocturnal and that they are cryptically-colored and patterned to avoid notice, I've detected the presence of a wild owl throughout my life far more often *by ear* than by eye.

We don't actually see the three permanent resident owl species – the Great Horned, Barred and Eastern Screech – around our north Williamston neighborhood very often, but according to the frequency of their various vocalizations they are becoming either chattier than they used to be or more established here than in the past. Throughout the 90s - our first full decade occupying these six-plus acres north of Williamston - we might hear the vocalization of either of only two resident owl species that seemed to be around. The experience was uncommon enough that when Carol or I would hear one, it merited a mention: "I heard a Great Horned (or Screech) Owl calling last night." We didn't hear our first Barred Owl vocalization from the property until several years into the new millennium.

Nowadays, when spending a significant amount of time outside in conducive weather conditions – around the yard, on the trail out back, or on a walk around the country block – we hear at least one of the three species often enough to regard them as nothing short of 'commonplace.' The winter months seem to offer the most opportunities. This is at least partially explained by the relative absence of competing sounds from frogs, birds, and crickets that may mask more distant calling owls. Less human-generated noise is produced in the winter than through the warmer months, too.

The meteorological state of little to no wind combined with a lack of significant precipitation seems to be ideal for owls to call as well as for us to hear them. We can and do hear any of them calling, true to owl form, at night; that is, when we are outside to actually hear it, but also when bedroom windows are open in the milder seasons. Sometimes on a still winter night one of us may awaken to a muted vocalization through the sealed pane, too.

Cumulatively over nearly twenty years we've heard the boisterous ululation of a Barred Owl at every daylight hour, even at high noon. It is a species with well-documented diurnal tendencies; but not so, the



Great Horned Owl.

Photo by Steve Sage.

Great Horned and Eastern Screech. These two will call quite frequently during the dimly-lit crepuscular hours that linger near dawn and sunset, and it is when we tend to hear them most often.

As schedules dictated this year, Carol and I hosted our adult kids to celebrate the holiday on Christmas Eve. That left Christmas Day for clean-up and other projects. In mid-afternoon I stepped outside to spend time raking leaves that remained on the lawn on the south side of the house; in the not-too-distant past, an activity more associated with Halloween or Thanksgiving times than with Christmas. Seemingly, in keeping with the rest of the record-breaking warmth the world experienced throughout 2023, the air temperature hovered around a freakishly mild 54 degrees. I worked in comfort in merely a sweatshirt.

Visibility near ground-level was unaffected, but the low, fog-like cloud cover produced a dreary, amorphous gray ceiling that would have obscured the tops of especially tall trees, buildings and antennae. Every now and then I could feel a mist or light drizzle speckle my exposed skin. I commenced to rake, gather piles of dark, wet leaves, wheel-barrow them into the nearby overgrowth, then repeat.

When in the yard on a relatively windless winter day I'll often hear a lone Great Horned Owl or a pair begin to hoot about an hour before sunset. I say *sunset* with a Mid-Michigan qualifier; we don't actually *see* the sun set. In this season the skies are overcast far more often than not. On a typically cloudy day around the winter solstice the atmosphere can already begin to appear dusky an hour or more before actual sunset.



Great Horned Owl. Photo by Greg Smith.

After raking awhile it was not yet 4 o'clock when I paused and detected the vocalizations of a Great Horned Owl. Roughly every twenty to thirty seconds or so, the low, toneless hoots traveled from distant woods to the west through the misty air to my ear. The owl was surely at least a half mile away, currently tucked within a north-to-south, two-mile long swath of lowland forest situated on private lands between Williamston and Lounsbury roads.

A Great Horned Owl pair's home range or territory typically encompasses multiple square miles. We are quite certain that our own property is within this pair's territory. We will occasionally hear one hooting in the woods out back in the night. However, this pair's nest, the core of its home range, exists somewhere in these forests to the west. Over ninety percent of the time throughout the year we hear the hoots emanate from this direction.

The typical Great Horned Owl territorial vocalization is often described in field guides as an atonal, toneless or even *dead* series of hoots. The signature pattern consists of three quick hoots followed by two drawn out hoots delivered over a few-second duration. A common word handle to help remember it is *Who's awake? Meee tooo*. When a pair calls back and forth, typically the male vocalizes first, delivering the pattern with slower, lower-register hoots than the female, who may respond some seconds later. When I hear only one owl vocalizing it is sometimes hard for me to discern if it is a male or female, but when a pair communicates back and forth the difference between the hoot qualities is unmistakable.

As I raked and hauled over the next hour the intermittent distant hooting served to alleviate the tedium of the task. While the area of freshly-cleared lawn expanded, I couldn't help briefly but frequently pausing so as to absorb the full effect of the five spectral syllables unfettered.

Abruptly, and in stark contrast to the Great Horned, both in volume and quality, a rolling *Hooo-aaah!* punctuated the damp air. Reflexively, the rake's motion ceased. I stood erect and turned to the northwest. A Barred Owl, one of a pair that has occupied this area for nearly twenty years, had vocalized from no more than a hundred yards away within a dense, mature stand of Norway Spruces a bit up the road at the front of a neighbor's property.



Barred Owl. Photo by Greg Smith.

Less than a minute had passed when it huffed a loud *Ha-ha-ha-hooo-aaah!* - the cadence of which calls to mind the delivery of an overly-dramatized sneeze. Both vocalizations are abbreviated forms of the Barred Owl's signature, decidedly emphatic territorial call often phoneticized as *Who-cooks-for-you... Who-cooks-for-you-aaalll!* Intently, I listened for more, but the Barred Owl had apparently moved on to other concerns. The Great Horned soon stopped vocalizing, as well. Perhaps it had worked up an appetite.

We've heard the directional vocalizations of the Barred Owls frequently enough that we have a rough sense of their home range, too. No doubt they nest and probably roost most frequently in the lowland woods directly behind this close neighbor to the north. Some ninety percent of the vocalizations we hear come from this direction - sometimes close, often further back. They do frequent our property though, as well as that of the neighbors to our immediate north and south along the east side of Williamston Road. A few times a year we manage to land a fortuitous view of one.

Now after 5pm, the air was becoming increasingly dusky. I put away the rake and wheel barrow. Air currents were nonexistent; a perfect night to not only listen for owls but to do it comfortably without overcoat, hat, gloves, etc.

When I had stacked the patio chairs in the back of the garage in the fall I assumed they would remain there for months. I extricated one, poured myself a drink and sat at the edge of the concrete amid the advancing darkness. Lights from the nature center's tanks shone from the windows at my back. A Spring Peeper began to peep from the trees behind the lawn. The night was so balmy, I can't say I was totally surprised. However, this was the first time in 35 years living here that I had heard one in the month of December.

Having lived a life so cognizant to the circannual activity of wild creatures throughout the seasons, I contemplated another unsettling milestone - no doubt the result of escalating man-induced climate weirdness. Until this night, December had remained the only month of the year in which I had not heard a Spring Peeper vocalizing. The dubious feat was official. I have now heard them peep here in *every month* of the year.

It is not unusual to hear an individual male Peeper calling from the woods outside of the spring breeding season. I've heard individuals as late as September, October, and even a few times on unseasonably warm days in November.

February had been appropriately 'peep-free' to my ear as well until just a few winters ago. A warm-up in mid-month lasted for multiple days. It triggered the early arousal of several dozen Peepers around the vernal ponds. Their vocalizations were joined by those of a few Wood Frogs and Western Chorus Frogs too; personal early-record dates for both. Winter resumed and the frogs dug back to quiet dormancy until their phenologically-*normal* emergence time.

I also particularly remember an early January night when the 2000s were young and climate change discussion produced barely a ripple in the media. The temperature had topped a crazy 60 degrees over a

few day period. On a night not unlike this one I had stepped out the back door into the supposed ‘dead of winter’ and was astounded to hear a Peeper roused out of dormancy. It remains the only vocalization of any frog species I have ever heard here in January, but given the continued lethargic response to our climate disaster I have little doubt that more peeps are on the near horizon for this coldest month of the year.

As the minutes passed vocalizations from other Peepers permeated the gloom, sporadically, amid longer gaps of silence; some were closer, others further back on our property or in the woods on properties to our north and south. None seemed too willing to engage in sustained vocalization as they do in the spring. A few sleepy peeps from one were followed by up to a minute of silence before it or a different one sounded again.

I sat listening, sipping and contemplating..., when suddenly I thought I heard a faint, scratchy quack come from the direction of our front pond. I focused my hearing; a minute later, yup, heard it again. A single male Wood Frog had begun to vocalize. Chalk up yet *another* first record for December.



Spring Peeper vocalizing.

Then, a soft but unmistakable pulsating trill diverted my thoughts. It rose from the silhouetted tree line to the south, delivered by an Eastern Screech-Owl. At a mere seven inches this owl resembles a cryptic Furby compared to a Great Horned or a Barred. The trill lasted for five or six seconds then stopped.



An Eastern Screech-Owl roosts in a tree cavity.
Photo by Greg Smith.

As if in harmony with all else that makes for a serene winter night a Screech-Owl's soothing, monotonous tremolo wafts gently through the air to the ear. This is one of a pair of commonly-heard territorial vocalizations for the species. The other can be described as a higher wavering whistle that descends over a few-second duration. Imagine what the whinny of a Yorkie-sized horse might sound like.

After a short period of silence another ethereal tremolo rose from the same unseen perch. Silence again, save a peep or two, then the next series of soft rapid pulses, and so on. Many more minutes passed as I listened to the unlikely musical trio on this, such a meteorologically unnatural Christmas night. Eventually, after a chain of perhaps two dozen tremolos, I anticipated and listened for the next phrase in the soliloquy, but it never came. The owl had apparently departed as visually undetected as it had arrived.

The gaps between the Peeper vocalizations seemed to be widening. Some individuals had obviously stopped calling. I hadn't heard a quack from the Wood Frog in many minutes either. Somewhat reluctantly I decided to call it a night. I lifted the patio chair and returned indoors.

Even for the veteran birder well-versed in identifying birds ‘by ear’ a three-owl day is not easy to come by. The weather conditions, the various vocalizing owl species and your proximity to each of them must fall into alignment in space and in time. I'm sure I've only experienced it a few times through my life, but this day proved to be a standout in so many additional ways.

You can arrange an appointment here almost any winter evening with a special focus on owls, including the possibility of hearing or even seeing a wild one. Details in the pages ahead.

-Jim McGrath



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Merlin.

Photo by Greg Smith.

Personalized **GUIDED** **WINTER** **BIRDING** *by Appointment* **For Adults, Students, Families**

For individual adults, adult couples, families, and other small groups. **Parents**, get your kids out of the house and into the fresh winter air while providing a fun and educational opportunity that may very well bloom into a lifetime interest! **Adults/Retirees**, a first excursion might just hook you... You may find yourself propelled into an engaging hobby that you'll wish you had found years ago!

While fewer birds can be found in Michigan through the winter months than in other seasons there is quite a list of species that can *only* be found here now. In addition to our common non-migratory species a slew of migrant visitors from northern coniferous and tundra biomes appear in varied habitats, many of which are a short drive from home. There are specific destinations to visit in the Lansing area to get great looks at Bald Eagles, Peregrine Falcons, Snowy Owls and other iconic birds.

We are now offering guided birding by appointment almost any day of the week. Jim will meet you at a local natural area of your or our choosing. The goal? To find and identify as many bird species as possible during our time together. Each participant will receive one of our Michigan Birds checklists to keep a running tab of species encountered. Some birds can be viewed even closer through our high-powered spotting scope. Ask about a special OWLING excursion either before sunrise or after sunset.

Pricing determined by duration and distance to the destination. Contact us to arrange a day and location.

UP Winter Birding Weekend, January 13-15

One opening remains for this weekend's guided birding trip between Sault Ste. Marie and Whitefish Point. A roster of only 5 participants guarantees a personal experience for all.

Cost: only \$340, includes all transportation and two nights lodging at a motel in Paradise.

Contact us for further information or to enroll.

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Almost all our snakes, like these Eastern Garters, are mild-mannered and easy to handle.

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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.” The personal, hands-on experiences we offer here are unmatched by any “conventional” zoo! We will bring snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders out of tanks to interact with adults or students of any age or grade-level.

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

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

Arrange a special evening visit. Weather-permitting we can step outside and attempt to attract a wild Screech-owl with recordings. More info about our hosted owling nights in the Dec newsletter (<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Dec23.pdf>).



Ask about arranging to drop your student here for personal weekly or monthly visits or regarding custom natural science lessons to further elevate their interest in nature and the environment.

Contact us for more info or to make an appointment.

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Some links to peruse...

Earth Was Due for Another year of Record Warmth. But This Warm?

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/26/climate/global-warming-accelerating.html?hpgpr=k-abar&smid=url-share&fbclid=IwAR1Kvquyh66zo-hNaybpDhAqwwf2XkmzPYGQVU1Gp2GDEDWWIhZykVeg2CE>

What if People Don't Need to Care About Climate Change to Fix It?

https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/12/31/magazine/hannah-richie-interview.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20231231&instance_id=111367&nl=the-morning®i_id=97652655&segment_id=153922&te=1&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e

Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce Romance is Bad for the Planet.

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/us/taylor-swift-and-travis-kelce-romance-is-bad-for-the-planet-couple-burns-a-whopping-70779-jet-fuel-in-the-last-three-months/articleshow/106184435.cms>

Eco-friendly New Year's Resolutions: 24 Ways to Go Green in 2024

[https://goloadup.com/eco-friendly-new-years-resolutions/?utm_source=Combined%20Opt-In%20List&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Sustainability%20Saturday%20%23284%20\(Dec%2030\)%20\(01HJ46WWRW31S9SFHZ7RKS9NNJ\)&bxid=Hp2Lsb&_kx=FbLUi03M3-bUPMxDg8_oyN1W0oPQc1Gxj4lChN9ex6E%3D.rQmDgT&fbclid=IwAR2wuRGVXqH417ZDdqdL00JTqEOEnG-rHMj0UJ2ofbRsaZxq9f4Xgpz8eg8](https://goloadup.com/eco-friendly-new-years-resolutions/?utm_source=Combined%20Opt-In%20List&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Sustainability%20Saturday%20%23284%20(Dec%2030)%20(01HJ46WWRW31S9SFHZ7RKS9NNJ)&bxid=Hp2Lsb&_kx=FbLUi03M3-bUPMxDg8_oyN1W0oPQc1Gxj4lChN9ex6E%3D.rQmDgT&fbclid=IwAR2wuRGVXqH417ZDdqdL00JTqEOEnG-rHMj0UJ2ofbRsaZxq9f4Xgpz8eg8)

-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
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Flightfree.org



RSPO.org



insideclimatenews.org

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