



*A Hackberry Butterfly*

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## **THIS ISSUE**

*Visit Our Center by Appointment*  
*Raise Polyphemus and Luna Caterpillars*  
*Around the State in July*  
*Summer Day Camps Update*  
*Thank You, Donors*  
*Packaged in Plastic? Don't Buy It!*

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## **Welcome to the Nature Stand**

Scientific study confirms that merely walking in an environment where you are surrounded by naturally-occurring plant and animal life is beneficial to your psychological well being in a number of ways; so much so that doctors are prescribing it to patients, and some are even referring to it as the “nature pill” (<https://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/how-does-nature-impact-our-wellbeing>). Pick up the pace and you’re also getting cardio-vascular benefit from the experience. However, the more your feet are in motion the more you are likely to miss most of the countless dynamic elements inherent in the natural diversity that passes as you walk. Stop often, look, listen, and smell.

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It happens quite often, actually. I am contracted by a scout troop, homeschool group, or small gathering of adults to lead a guided “nature walk”... , then we don’t walk anywhere! When the hour is over, however, the participants are far from disappointed, and more likely somewhat overwhelmed at the amount of plant and animal life pointed out, identified and discussed while never having lost sight of the parking lot. With participant legs spending far more time standing than striding, yes, calling it a “nature walk” could be construed as half-misleading. “Nature stand” may be more accurate, but the term by itself, without explanation, sounds like there must not be much to see; or perhaps it conjures an image of some organic produce or naturey knick knack booth at the local farmers’ market.

I contend that the mere idea of a guided “nature walk” that is true to both words is a natural conundrum, a walking contradiction. Decide, already! Do you want to study and learn about the elements of your natural surroundings or do you want to walk? Each activity, if done right, obfuscates the other. For instance, don’t expect to effectively identify a trailside tree, wildflower, or butterfly, much less notice the well-hidden nest of a bird, if your legs are in continuous motion. Conversely, don’t expect to get your heart rate up much when you are breaking stride every handful of steps to check out the uniform venation on a beech leaf, a pearl crescent butterfly warming itself open-winged in the sunshine, or the nest of an indigo bunting hidden only knee-high in a dense, thorny, multi-flora rose at trail’s edge.

When contracted to lead a group on a nature walk (read “stand”) at a local natural area I almost never get there early to preview what things to note, identify and ecologically discuss to the various-aged

beneficiaries. Some may argue that a paid professional should be more prepared, however, decades of experience in diverse natural communities at varied successional stages within Lower Michigan's Eastern Deciduous Forest Biome in all seasons has instilled a confidence that I can survey our surroundings and instantaneously find a wealth of natural life to help others identify, understand, and ultimately appreciate. Not only that, I love to be surprised along with the group I am leading when suddenly encountering a certain species of bird, butterfly, flower, fern, or other naturally-occurring life form. To a large extent, the random, dynamic and interactive diversity present in any given location steers the direction of the experience more than I do, and this method feels naturally right.

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Case in point, a few weeks ago, Marietta and Alden Leatherman arranged a gift for their friends, Aspen and Tim Bernath-Plaisted - contracting me to guide the couples in an interpretive walk at Portland State Game Area, one of the Leathermans' favorite places to hike, just a few miles from their home. We met at their home, but since we would be going our separate ways after finishing we caravanned in three vehicles with the Leathermans leading the way. We drove into the game area down a pitted two-track, through mature deciduous forest toward a parking lot that was situated about a half mile in. It had rained the night before and puddles had formed in the depressions.

I followed closely behind Marietta and Alden with Aspen and Tim behind me. As I watched their vehicle making progress in front of me it emerged from the deeply shaded woods into a small clearing where sunshine bathed the ground. Suddenly, there erupted a flurry of dozens of medium-sized butterflies, up, around and then behind their moving vehicle. They drove around the corner, but the sight made me brake abruptly. The butterflies had been gathering and feeding around a puddle situated in the bright light only to explode into a whirlwind as the car had passed and disturbed them.

I threw the car into park and jumped out to investigate. Tim and Aspen stopped behind me and immediately got out, as well. The butterflies zipped and zigzagged in all directions around us as we approached the puddle, and I identified them aloud as hackberry butterflies. Many had begun to return to the puddle, but others alit on surrounding vegetation, however briefly, then returned to their hyper airborne states. Others alighted without hesitation on our heads, shoulders, and clothing. It appeared that, to them, any landing surface was fair game as long as it was bathed in a singular necessity – sunshine. Tim was taking photos of butterflies as they landed on Aspen when Marietta and Alden appeared on foot from around the corner ahead of us.

“When we passed all those butterflies, I thought you might stop,” Marietta laughed, and they were soon immersed amid the butterfly storm, too. When all stated that they had never heard of a hackberry butterfly I pulled a small paperback from my pocket - the *Golden Guide to Butterflies & Moths* – to show the page to the participants, complete with color images of butterfly, larva and even the leaves of the food plant – yes, hackberry - in the background.

I mentioned that there must be a lot of hackberry trees in the vicinity to support so many butterflies, and that just like the monarch and milkweed, this was the singular food source for this butterfly's larva. A quick panoramic scan revealed one, then another and many more hackberries of varying heights and trunk widths. We stepped off trail to investigate more closely.



*A Hackberry's bark is quite unique.*

A hackberry trunk exhibits an interesting texture and pattern – many convoluted wing-like rows or ribs that run up and down its length. Yet, the bark is quite smooth between them. Each rib rising from the surface may sometimes jut almost an inch above the rest of the bark. The leaf is shaped in a notably asymmetrical mien around the midrib at its base.



*Hackberry nipple galls.*

There were so many butterflies, I suggested they might be mating and egg-laying, and that there may be eggs visible on the hackberry leaves. As we looked, Tim pointed to a leaf and asked if a series of round bumps on its underside were eggs. He had discovered the “nipple galls” of the hackberry psyllid, the developing nymph of which sips sap from within the gall on the leaf without harming the tree.

One trunk had vines with two distinctly different compound leaves – poison ivy and Virginia creeper. We discussed the saying, *leaves of three let it be*, and the irony that there are, in fact, many locally-growing plants, shrubs and trees with compound leaves comprised of three

leaflets. The many wild black raspberries at our knees had compound leaflets of three. I spotted another small tree next to the trail - a hop-tree - which also had compound leaflets of three. I then showed the participants a page in the butterfly guide depicting the giant swallowtail, the larvae of which feed on the leaves of this understory tree. We scanned the leaves of other hop-trees along the two-track for the strange larvae that mimic a wet bird dropping and that also, appropriately, stick to the *top* of a leaf.

An Eastern wood-pewee, a tropical migrant, shrilly called its name in the shady woods behind us. I directed their attention to the bird and expounded on the advantages of learning to “bird by ear” to get an enhanced sense of what species are out there, beyond the limits of our vision. I was pointing out the song of a cardinal and the incessant *peter-peter-peter* of a territorial tufted titmouse when suddenly, a distant staccato *kakakaka-kowlp-kowlp-kowlp* of a yellow-billed cuckoo, another tropical migrant, echoed through the forest. I pulled out my phone and opened a bird identification app to show each of them the image of the slim bird with an especially long tail, then explained that this secretive bird tends to be especially difficult to put your eye on. I then played a recording of the call they had just heard from the real bird so as to reinforce it in their minds.



*The secretive Yellow-billed Cuckoo can be tough to spot. Photo © Steve Sage.*

Just like that, a half hour had slipped by. Marietta and Alden had, in fact, parked in the lot that was supposed to be our intended destination right around the corner. While they and Aspen walked to it, Tim and I drove our vehicles ahead to the lot.

I brought a few extra pairs of binoculars which were distributed among them. I also presented each couple with one of our Michigan Birds checklists to keep track of birds identified during our time together. Although it lists well over 300 wild birds over six pages it is small enough to fit in a pocket. I encouraged them to check the birds as we encountered them in order to have a record of some of the breeding species on nesting territories in this part of Portland State Game Area. I then commenced to point out still more sounds in the avian orchestra that surrounded us...

An American redstart sang a series of hyper, high-pitched notes in the understory on one side of us. On the other, a red-eyed vireo, further away, sang a tune to be remembered by the words, *cherries... sweet cherries... cherrio... sweet cherries... cherries...*, on and on with the shortest of pauses between each of the phrases. Still further in the distance I directed their ears to a yellow-throated vireo singing a different tune with the same spaced cadence but with a slightly raspy voice – *three-ay...three-ay...three-ay...*

I cued the American redstart song on my phone to demonstrate how reactive these birds were to an intruder on their territory, but also to give the participants a good look at a bird that would otherwise remain out of sight. Within a minute the tiny, but starkly black and orange little warbler darted among the foliage over our heads. Binoculars raised, it didn't take long for everyone to get a satisfyingly close-up look at another tropical migrant.



Scarlet Tanager. Photo © Steve Sage.

A scarlet tanager, yet another tropical migrant - glowingly red with offsetting jet black wings and tail - began singing in the woods not far away. I pointed out how it is often described as having a song similar to that of a robin, but with a sore throat, then played the recording. A minute later, oohs and aahs drifted from behind raised binoculars as they trained on the bird and all its brilliance. Then the cuckoo called again in the woods behind us and all heads turned in its direction.

The Leathermans led us to another lot very near where we stood but along the Grand River. A bushy field on one side produced the tunes of song and field sparrows along with an indigo bunting. A rose-breasted grosbeak also sang in distant trees along the river bank. Then my ears perked up over the sweet whistles of not the Baltimore oriole, but the far less common orchard oriole. Before long the participants got good looks at the male, which, in contrast to the more familiar oriole, sports a deep plum color in place of the orange. Minutes later on the edge of the lot we discovered that the oriole and its mate were coming and going from a woven nest which was remarkably well-hidden among the foliage in the uppermost limb of a small boxelder tree.

The Leathermans led us through a line of overgrowth, and we found ourselves atop a forested embankment, the flowing water visible through the trunks below us. The thin, buzzy notes of an unseen blue-gray gnatcatcher seeped from the canopy over our heads. Minutes later, down the bank the air was punctuated by the loud, emphatic *sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet* of a prothonotary warbler - a rich-yellow bird with deep blue wings and tail. Like the orchard oriole, it too is tropical migrant and southern-breeding bird that has been steadily increasing its range northward into Michigan. I showed the bird to them from the app, played the song, and within a minute it was flitting branch to branch above us.

When we returned to the lot we were amazed that two hours had elapsed so quickly since we stopped to view the butterflies. We couldn't have walked more than a tenth of a mile and had experienced a degree of natural diversity that, for most, would pass unrecognized in a miles-long walk through the same area.

As natural encounters and natural diversity awareness swiftly pile up it becomes clear that there is so much more to experience in the very same area with each ensuing visit and season. Furthermore, a sense is elicited that these natural communities are to be respected and valued dearly not just for the well-being of their myriad, and easily overlooked inhabitants but for the well-being of the planet in general, not to mention for our own well-being, as well.

From Alden Leatherman, post-outing...

*Going for a nature walk with Jim is not a good way to get your exercise. We stepped out into a parking lot we've used dozens of times to park, hop out and head down the trail. Jim didn't even make it into the parking lot. He stopped at the entrance when a cloud of butterflies flew up from a puddle. We learned about hackberry butterflies and how unique what we were seeing was. Then, Jim heard a yellow-billed cuckoo. That was it. We spent hours listening to, looking for, scanning with binoculars, and seeing birds we previously had no idea were there for our observation ... all the time learning more about the deep inter-connections each bird, butterfly, plant and we have with each other. What an awakening! What a world! My cardio awaits.*

-Jim McGrath



# Nature Discovery

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*Identify and feed all 10 species of Michigan turtles..*

## Visit Our Nature Center by Appointment

**Suggested Minimum Donation:  
\$5/person/hour**

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 unique, hands-on experiences here are a welcome relief to a student’s screen-learning time! We will bring snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders out of tanks to interact with adults or students of any age or grade-level. Visitors are required to wear a mask during all indoor time.

Identify and feed “the grand slam of Michigan turtles,” all ten species native to our state, as they swim in pools at your feet. 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 and live frogs. Hold or “wear” a gentle 6-foot Black Rat Snake – the largest in the state!



*Check out our caterpillar “farm.”*

Many more snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders to identify and feed. Take a guided walk on our trails to identify birds, insects, trees, vines, and invasive plants.

Ask about arranging guided interpretive experiences or guided birding outings, for your small group of kids, adults or families at a local natural area of your or our choosing.

Contact us for more information or to make an appointment.

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## *Raise Caterpillars of Big and Beautiful Polyphemus or Luna Moths this Summer!*



***They're double-brooding!***

***That means...***

*A second batch of fertile eggs and newly hatched caterpillars will begin to be available later this month. Want to get caterpillars now? Large and impressive larvae from the first brood are available now from our huge "caterpillar farm!" Caterpillars come with complete, printed care instructions. Contact us for pricing and to arrange for pick-up almost any day. A great and highly-educational summer hobby!*



## Around *the State* in July

After a 15-month pandemic-induced hiatus this item within our newsletter is finally back. Here are a few events open to the public in which we will be presenting/exhibiting. Check appropriate websites and social media for more details and directions.

- ❖ Sunday, July 10: 10:30am. *Turtle Tails & Snake Tales*; Benzonia Public Library, Benzonia.
- ❖ Saturday, July 17: 12:00-4:00pm. *Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit*; MDNR Outdoor Adventure Center, Detroit.
- ❖ Saturday, July 24: 10:30am. & *Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Presentation*: Huron County Nature Center, Port Austin.
- ❖ Saturday, July 31: 2:00-3:00pm. *Sustain Our Swallowtails Presentation*; Commerce Twp Library, Commerce Township.

## Only Two Spots Left in Our Day Camps

Here is a list of the dates and age ranges of the day camps remaining this summer. For fees and other details click this link:

<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/SummerCamps2021.pdf>

In red after each listing below is the number of spaces remaining on that week's roster. Feel free to enroll any student who is older than the age range listed for the remaining spots. Guaranteed, the content *will not* be "beneath" your student!

July 26-29: Nature Discovery Nature Discovery (FD – 7 to 9 yrs) **1 Space Remaining**

August 2-5: MI Reptiles & Amphibians (FD – 10 yrs & older) **FULL**

Aug 9-12: Nature Discovery (FD – 7 to 9 yrs) **1 Space Remaining**

Contact us to enroll by email ([naturedisc87@gmail.com](mailto:naturedisc87@gmail.com)) or phone (517.655.5349)

## LCC Youth Day Camps



Openings are also still available for 4-day summer science camps taught by Carol for students entering grades 2-8 at LCC's East Lansing Campus. Check out the schedule below, which offers hands-on, fun learning with Chemistry, Physics, Math, Engineering, Natural Science, and Machine Building. Morning classes, 9am-noon. Afternoon classes, 1-4pm.

July 12-15 AM: Fun with Physics (Gr 2-3). PM: Wetland Explorers (Gr 4-8)

July 19-22 AM: Rockets & Robots (Gr 6-8). PM: Classroom Arcade (Gr 4-5)

For details or to register visit [lcc.edu/seriousfun](http://lcc.edu/seriousfun).



*A heartfelt “thank you”  
to all our supporters  
including donors  
this past month...*

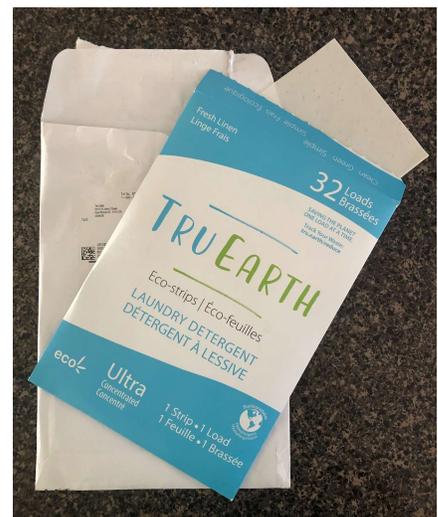
*Anonymous  
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Alyssa Pozniak  
Ryan Shaw  
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*Eight-spotted Forester  
on Virginia Creeper*

## ***Packaged in Plastic? Don't Buy It!***

In past newsletters we've highlighted some of the ways we are working to eliminate throw-away plastic packaging wrapped around products we buy for our daily needs. A walk down any retail store aisle proves our point. It is difficult to find biodegradable packaging alternatives, which is precisely the way the politician-bribing fossil fuel industry planned it.

Coffee? Check. Rice? Check. Beans? Lentils? Check, check. Raisins? Check. Dried cherries? Check. Popcorn? Snack mix? Check, check. We continue to bring our own container to fill in the bulk food aisles of Foods for Living in East Lansing: <https://foodsforliving.com/>. While all bulk food providers supply plastic containers or you to fill with said items, many, like FFL will allow you to bring and fill your own over and over. Start giving a crap about how your purchasing habits affect the increasingly overwhelmed environment and planet we share. Packaged in plastic? Don't buy it!



Speaking of which, Who Gives a Crap sells rolls of toilet paper and paper towel wrapped in paper within a corrugated cardboard shipping box - as opposed to the kajillion throw-away-plastic-wrapped choices in Meijer's TP aisle. Toilet paper? Check. We buy 48-roll boxes here:

[https://us.whogivesacrap.org/?utm\\_source=adwords&utm\\_medium=paid\\_search&utm\\_campaign=1024047963&utm\\_content=50759013539&utm\\_term=who%20gives%20a%20crap%20toilet%20paper&gclid=CjwKCAjwuIWHBhBDEiwACXQYsTjI59qDH9gNzOPYNNoah9P362HBbFjayTNp7bLWX0GxEXBwu\\_LCGxoCydAQAvD\\_BwE](https://us.whogivesacrap.org/?utm_source=adwords&utm_medium=paid_search&utm_campaign=1024047963&utm_content=50759013539&utm_term=who%20gives%20a%20crap%20toilet%20paper&gclid=CjwKCAjwuIWHBhBDEiwACXQYsTjI59qDH9gNzOPYNNoah9P362HBbFjayTNp7bLWX0GxEXBwu_LCGxoCydAQAvD_BwE)

Now, laundry detergent? Check! We just purchased our first laundry strips from Tru Earth. Good riddance, big plastic jugs:

[https://www.tru.earth/?gclid=CjwKCAjwuIWHBhBDEiwACXQYsblGYzSL5ln2Y2q8VVSZ6T-M-iTAKvta6RNJONzU-gsljXveEmAR\\_8hoCgcUQAvD\\_BwE](https://www.tru.earth/?gclid=CjwKCAjwuIWHBhBDEiwACXQYsblGYzSL5ln2Y2q8VVSZ6T-M-iTAKvta6RNJONzU-gsljXveEmAR_8hoCgcUQAvD_BwE)

-JM



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**Union of  
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