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Thank you, Donors

Links for Environmental Responsibility

Buntings by Ear



The presence of a male Indigo Bunting can be detected far more effectively by ear than by eye. Photo by Greg Smith.

My daughter has mentioned in jest (I think) that Dad has a way of throwing a wet blanket over someone else's fun...

Several summers ago a neighbor saw me working in the yard, called to me and made her way over. She seemed excited to share some news.

"I just saw a bird in my yard that I haven't seen in years!" she exclaimed. "An *Indigo Bunting!*"

"Beautiful bird, huh?" I replied.

"Yes, such a brilliant blue." This neighbor is aware my interests as well as what I do for a living, but she asked anyway. "Have you seen one recently?"

"Actually, they nest on our property every summer. I may not see it every day but I hear it singing all the time."

I sensed a flag in her enthusiasm; not so rare after all. To soften the blow, I quickly added that she most certainly has a pair nesting on her acreage, too, and that the song is quite distinctive.

I waited for her to take the bait and ask me what it sounded like, after which I would share with her what I am about to share with readers here. She didn't bite. The conversation ended shortly thereafter. We went back to our respective yard chores.

The migratory Indigo Bunting is a small member of the passerine family, Cardinalidae. It spends the winter months largely throughout Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. As are most long-distance traveling songbirds, it is a nocturnal migrant and has the distinction of being the first songbird demonstrated to actually orient and navigate using the position of stars overhead.



Some but not most Indigo Buntings will visit feeders – especially those stocked with thistle or nyger. Photo by Greg Smith.

Spring migrants arrive in Michigan throughout the month of May, then maintain breeding territories through June and July. Some buntings hold territories even into early August. Although adults feed on various small seeds and berries - and may even show up at a finch feeder - insect matter is taken in abundance during the breeding portion of the year.

Open woods, woodland edges and overgrown hedgerows separating fields are typical preferred breeding habitats, of which Michigan's Lower Peninsula has plenty. The muted, mostly buffy-colored female is appropriately camouflaged on a small nest of fine twigs, plant fibers, etc., located deep within a thorny Multi-flora Rose or other dense shrubbery positioned rarely more than a few feet off the ground.

The male, however, chooses perches well off the ground to sing its loud and frequent territorial announcement - often the topmost branches of the tallest trees in the area immediately surrounding its nest. When available, high utility lines also suffice.

Despite the brightness shown in field guides or in photos chosen for display by a photographer, a male Indigo Bunting perched in the open can easily be overlooked. It turns out that the 'blue' we see is not pigmentation but unique structural features in the feathers that cause them to refract the blue portion of the spectrum when light strikes them.

Indeed, on overcast days, or perhaps when the bird is not positioned in relation to the sun's rays to reflect the blue wavelength at the necessary angle toward the viewer, the bird appears dark gray or even black to the human eye. For positive identification this is an especially critical reason why the Indigo Bunting's song is so important to recognize.

No one will accuse this bird of being a 'soft-talker.' From rotating high perches throughout its few-acre breeding home range the male raises his bill skyward and belts out rapid notes loudly enough to be heard by buntings a quarter mile distant or more.

Nearly all the notes of a song phrase are delivered in pairs or couplets. I recall first learning the Indigo Bunting's song as an MSU undergrad during a summer internship at Sarett Nature Center near Benton Harbor. The director, Chuck Nelson, introduced me to the word handle, *Fire fire where where quick quick put it out*. Over decades I've, in turn, shared it with many beginning birders of all ages.

The song is delivered by a given male so rapidly that the casual ground-bound listener is almost always not cognizant that the bird overhead is singing every note twice before moving on to the next. When I am walking on a late spring or early summer day with someone and hear an Indigo Bunting singing, I'll stop and call the doubled notes to their attention. They too stop, listen intently over a few phrases, and respond with the classic *Oh yeaah* of new found awareness.



The female Indigo Bunting's colors are muted, with mere tinges of blue on the wings and tail. Photo by Greg Smith.

Be ready for occasional improvisations to the standard bunting sheet music. Some birds will sing an abbreviated version of the song that may last through only two or three couplets. Others will twitter five

or six couplets off in a row, but then seem to run out of breath over the last few notes. Sometimes an individual will elide parts, whereby it misses the second note of a couplet or two. An odd bird may also slip an extra iteration onto a couplet here and there.

Once you have the song down pat, your ears will reveal the presence of far more Indigo Buntings in a rural neighborhood than your eyes ever could. If the habitat matches the needs of the species (not dense woods, not well-groomed subdivisions), a bunting pair on breeding territory can be encountered every one or two tenths of a mile down a rural road. To wit, on a late spring morning you could stand at the edge of an agricultural field and listen to male buntings in stereo; vocally dueling from the tallest trees jutting above linear hedgerows on opposite sides of the broad expanse.



Photo by Greg Smith.

Despite their relative commonality, surveys of Indigo Bunting breeding populations over decades have indicated significant declines, in step with many other neo-tropical migrant songbirds. Humanity continues to chip away at good bunting habitat both here and in its winter range. Dangers during migration include tall buildings with which they collide during night time migration. Predation by roaming cats and nest parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds also continue to negatively affect populations. Don't take the Indigo Bunting's existence for granted, and be aware that your choices of where and how you live do impact them for worse - or, with knowledge, for better.



Note the dense growth under the trees at the edge of our lawn. Typical bunting nesting habitat structure.

Every year an Indigo Bunting pair nests somewhere on our six acres. Sometimes a male spends most of his time singing toward the back of the property, allowing me to assume that his mate is tending a nest hidden in dense shrubbery back there somewhere. I've stumbled upon a nest several times over the years when off-trail, usually while pulling Garlic Mustard or clearing invasive Oriental Bittersweet vines.

This year, a male Indigo Bunting sings abundantly in the tree tops and on the utility lines right out the back door of the nature center. According to how often it positions itself over the north side of our country lawn, its mate and nest are likely hidden within the dense growth that borders it.

Would you like to get to know the Indigo Bunting's song through real life encounters? Arrange to pay a visit to our nature center any time now through early summer. You can learn all the accompanying bird songs while you're at it, as well.

Better yet, make a special appointment - for just yourself, for a couple or a small group of family/friends - to be guided on a custom two-hour 'birding by ear' tour around our neighborhood or yours!

- Jim McGrath

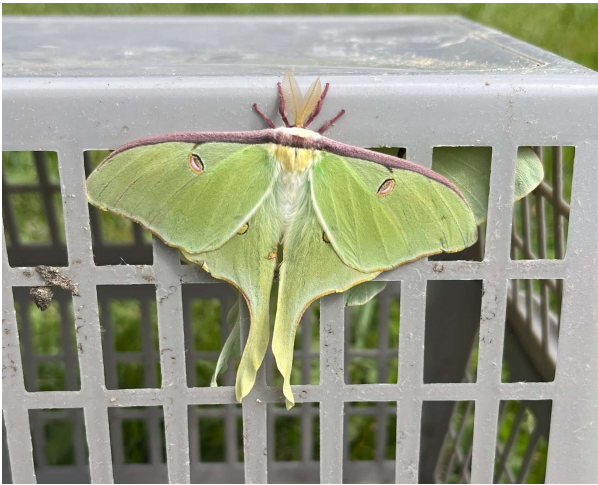
Nature Discovery

5900 N. Williamston Road
517.655.5349

Williamston, MI 48895

naturedisc87@gmail.com

www.naturediscovery.net



*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, families and small groups are welcome to schedule an intimate indoor/outdoor 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 unrivaled in any conventional zoo or nature center! We will bring snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders out of tanks to interact with adults or kids of any age or grade-level.

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.



Photo by Greg Smith.

Handle 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! Many more snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders to identify and feed.

See huge, beautiful giant silk moths, like the Luna Moth above, emerging from cocoons and attracting mates now. Take a guided walk around the yard and on our trails to experience and identify birds, insects, trees, vines, and invasive plants.

Contact us for more info or to make an appointment.

Guided Adult BIRDING Opportunities

Barry County Birding

Monday, June 10; 6:30am to 2pm

Jim will drive and guide an intimate group of no more than 5 participants as we attempt to encounter 60 species or more - highlighted by the state-threatened Cerulean Warbler - in a diversity of habitats through the rolling forests and fields of this biologically rich county.

FEE: \$65. Includes all transportation.

Contact us to enroll in advance.



Kirtland's Warbler Country

Wednesday-Thursday, June 12-13

Depart 6:30am; Return @6:30pm.

Jim will drive and guide an intimate group of no more than 5 participants as we attempt to encounter 70 species or more - highlighted by the state-endangered Kirtland's Warbler - in forests and fields of the sandy Jack Pine country between Grayling and Roscommon.

FEE: \$270. Includes lodging & transportation.

Contact us to enroll in advance.



Raise

Giant Silk Moths

this Summer

It's like

raising Monarchs...

on steroids!

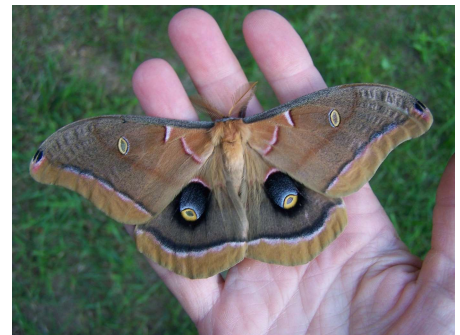


Eggs and young larvae of huge and beautiful Polyphemus, Cecropia and Luna Moths are available for sale now thru early July.

Five eggs/larvae (per species): \$15.

Includes detailed care instructions.

Contact us to make purchase arrangements.



Around the State in June

- ❖ Saturday, June 1: 10am-3pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Sturgeon Festival; Port Huron.
- ❖ Saturday, June 1: 10am-4pm. Michigan Turtles Exhibit and Presentation; Kirtland's Warbler Wildlife Festival, Roscommon.
- ❖ Saturday, June 8: 10am-2pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Get Outdoors Day, Baldwin.
- ❖ Saturday, June 15: 10:30am MI Reptiles & Amphibians Presentation; Huron County Nature Center, Hume Twp.
- ❖ Sunday, June 16: 10am-2pm. Giant Silk Moths & MI Salamanders Exhibit; Eastern Ingham Farmers Market, Williamston.
- ❖ Thursday, June 20: 2-4pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Farmington Community Library.
- ❖ Saturday, June 22: 2-5pm. Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; 7pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Presentation; Ludington State Park.
- ❖ Tuesday, June 25: 10:30am MI Wildlife Presentation; Millington-Arbela District Library, Millington., Hume Twp.



*We wish to express gratitude to all our supporters,
including generous donors this past month...*



*Vani Anbarasan
Rafe & Margie Davis
Jan Heminger
Amelia Oxley
Alex Price
Tracy Prush
Heather & Seth Seger
Gene Wasserman*

This Red Admiral was raised as a caterpillar on Stinging Nettle leaves at the nature center. Visit us by appointment and acquire your own to raise to 'butterflyhood.'

Links for Environmental Responsibility

A Giant Crater in Siberia is Belching Up Russia's Past

https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/23/opinion/russia-oil-mining-permafrost.html?campaign_id=39&emc=edit_ty_20240523&instance_id=124226&nl=opinion-today®i_id=97652655&segment_id=167540&te=1&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e

These Stupid Trucks Are Literally Killing Us

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jN7mSXMruEo>

Turn cardboard packaging into eco-friendly pots.

https://www.instagram.com/reel/C7meBcsK6ac/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFlZA==

Biden-Harris Administration Announces Recipients of Nearly \$900 Million for Clean School Buses Under President's Investing in America Agenda

https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/biden-harris-administration-announces-recipients-nearly-900-million-clean-school-buses?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAAR2GFtb0B1j1c5ABvmi4ZvdRJv_fECk55txRbqX5ElMuEbZIsu3pTQ4AIXQ_aem_ARXYjLCI07xdVEntDjt3Oef3P2UY-KXDIrCbNqtkTFqvVKZXK5w-9CKxz84KITAfMuc9yywIm5dRyVUyPq9CocY

-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

Become a fan of *Nature Discovery* on Facebook!

NATURE DISCOVERY 5900 N. Williamston Road Williamston, MI 48895

(517) 655-5349 naturedisc87@gmail.com www.naturediscovery.ne