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***“Free-Range” Nature Camp?***

Here’s a novel approach to a summer natural science and wildlife education experience for a child. It’s not just for any child, though. In fact, by far, most would not qualify. It’s meant to cater to a special handful, 5<sup>th</sup> grade and older, who would readily be described by people who know them as “nature nuts.” Some are certainly nature prodigies. The opportunity may not qualify as a “camp” when only one, two or three students are the full roster, but for now, let’s call it Free-Range Day Camp...

In *Last Child in the Woods* Richard Louve reminisces about the days of his youth. He could have been talking about so many of our own days back then. The overwhelming amount of our leisure time was spent outside in all seasons, and any enrollment in an organized camp and other activity was the exception to the rule. Outside was where we wanted to be, and we made our own fun with no adult input. In this way, whether there was a specific interest in nature or not, we were physically connected to, and physically active in the environment every day.

Fast forward to today. Louve argues that the emergence of current technological and social trends have stifled children’s opportunities, much less, desire, to engage in self-made outside recreation. Despite the existence now of a slew of organized outdoor-oriented camps for kids of all ages offered by parks, nature centers, colleges, and more, most have a difficult time filling a roster, including us. By and large, children today don’t want to be outside. They’d rather be doing something else, preferably in a climate-controlled setting.

However, each year we meet a number of children who do want to be outside. In fact, a few exhibit an all-consuming absorption with the natural world that reminds me of *me* at that age. Many of these nature prodigies are wired in a way that allows them to be perfectly content to pursue their relationships with the living environment at their own pace and according to their personal interests – be it bugs, frogs, snakes, birds or all of the above – if an opportunity existed to fulfill it. As educators, we feel an instinctive desire to support these special students in any way we can.

Imagine a situation where such a student is given free-rein of the six-acres of natural area at Nature Discovery, all day, on his or her terms. In addition, there would be full access to the nature center classroom and to the huge zoo of Michigan reptiles & amphibians here. One or more of our staff would always be near to assist the student whenever needed. The student would also be encouraged to participate in any aspects of the operation of the facility, from catching insects to feed to the frogs, to

collecting worms and slugs under logs to feed to snakes and box turtles, to watering the vegetable garden and flowers, to saving a tree from the strangling grasp of invasive bittersweet vines.

We are targeting the week of July 23 where parents of an appropriate-aged student who exhibits this sort of intensity for nature can make special arrangements with us for the week. One prerequisite: We ask that the student have had some previous experience with us through our programs, through prior camp enrollments or through school visits. Contact us to discuss whether your student is right for the program, cost, and other details.

-Jim McGrath

## Open Hours

**Sunday, March 11**

**1 to 5pm; \$5 admission**

## 2pm Presentation

# **Welcoming Back the Blackbirds**

All black birds are not necessarily blackbirds, and not all blackbirds are black birds, either! Find out how all this makes sense in this informative presentation featuring Powerpoint images and audio recordings. Did you know that ten different species of blackbirds can be found in Michigan? Red-winged blackbirds, grackles and a few other blackbird species are some of the first spring migrants to arrive in Michigan, and they're arriving now. For anyone who has a tendency to dismiss these birds as "unimpressive" or as "nuisances," this overview of each species along with their unique life histories and fascinating behaviors is sure to make you view them in a much more appreciative light!



*A male red-winged blackbird uses its red "epaulettes" and its voice to defend a breeding territory in the cattails. Which is more important?*  
Photo © Steve Sage



At the presentation's conclusion participants will spend time outside identifying blackbirds and other species by sight and by their calls. We'll carpool to a local roadside wetland to identify and observe as many bird species as possible, including red-winged blackbirds displaying and defending breeding territories within cattail stands. We'll draw some birds in for closer looks with audio recordings, too. Don't forget your binoculars!

Visit and interact with our huge Michigan zoo of snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders. Ask us for a guided walk on the trails. Refreshments available, too!

## February Recap

*Birding by Ear, Late Winter Edition*, during our Sunday, February 12 open hours, was attended by 18 walk-in participants. In the yard we got several birds to respond to the recordings, including a titmouse that refused to quit calling near us once it heard the vocal “rival” in its territory.

*Muskegon Area Birding Day*, on Saturday, February 18, had 4 participants. The group tallied 36 species for the day, including rough-legged hawks, long-tailed ducks, and two separate snowy owls.

**Thank you to all participants!**



*Trip participant, Andrew Nowicki, photographed this snowy owl at the edge of a dry, grassy holding pond at the wastewater facility.*

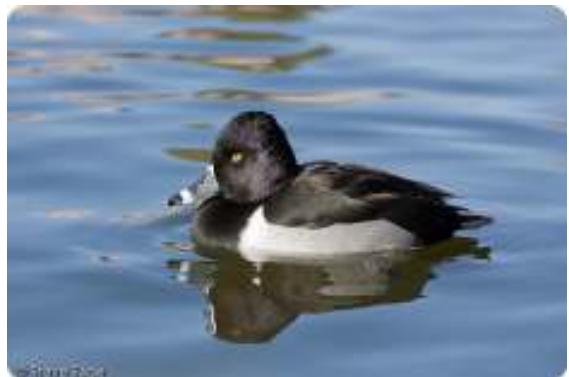


*Our Summer 2010 birding camp participants.*

Discovery for visually-impaired youth, 10 years old through high school. On **Saturday, March 17**, Jim will lead a full day of birding-by-ear, traversing a diversity of locations throughout the area. Jim will also lead a special 4-day birding-by-ear camp for visually-impaired youth, 10 and older, **June 25-28**. Do you know any visually-impaired student who may be interested in attending either event? Contact us for details. Enrollment is limited.

## *Birding at Maple River* *Saturday, March 24* *6:30am to Noon*

Join our intimate group of only 5 adults on a guided excursion to the Maple River area, north of St. John's. We'll tally as many early spring birds as possible, including a slew of early migrants. Tundra swans along with an impressive list of ducks will be viewed up-close through our spotting scope. Eagles, killdeer, phoebes, meadowlarks, tree swallows, and much more... By morning's end we will have tallied as many as 50 species! All participants will receive a Michigan Birds checklist on which to keep a tally of the day's finds. Upon the end of our birding day, we'll stop for a late breakfast at the Hitching Post Restaurant and review the morning's adventure. COST: \$35, includes all transportation. Arrangements can be made to pick you up on the way. Contact us to reserve your spot.



*Ring-necked Duck.*

*Photo by Steve Sage.*



# Spring Break Camps and Field Trips...



## Spring Break Wildlife Day Camp

Monday & Tuesday, April 2 & 3, 9am-3pm.

For K & older.

Students can sign-up for one or two days of nature and outdoor-oriented activities. Each day will encompass feeding, caring for, and handling our huge captive collection of Michigan snakes, turtles, frogs, salamanders and lizards. Each day will also offer a variety engaging outside explorations and activities dependent on the weather, including bird-watching and exploration of our vernal pond, just beginning to awaken with breeding frogs, salamanders and invertebrates galore. Students who wish to wade into the pond

can bring old shoes, socks and pants in which to wade, a change of clothes, and a towel.

**Cost: \$50/day.** \$45/day for more than one day or more than one child. Hot lunch and snack are provided. Ask us about after-care arrangements. Advance registration required.

## Spring Break Day Field Trips

Monday & Tuesday, April 2 & 3, 9am-3pm.

For 3<sup>rd</sup> grade & older.

Sign-up for one or both days of fun in the wild. Bring binoculars if you have them. Students will tally birds encountered on checklists. We'll hike dikes and trails around abundant wetlands, woods and fields. Hand-feeding birds, too!

Monday, April 2: Maple River State Game Area

Tuesday, April 3: Kensington Metropark

**COST: \$55/day.** Pack a bag lunch and water bottle, and dress for windy conditions. Advance registration required.



*DON'T call 'em "Seagulls!" They're Ring-billed Gulls.*

## Muskegon Area Field Trip

Wednesday, April 4; 7:30am to 5pm

For 3<sup>rd</sup> grade & older.

Join us for an extended day of "west coast" nature. We'll stop in the morning at Muskegon Wastewater Facility, known by birders as one of the best places to see birds in the state. Then on to Hoffmaster State Park. We'll visit the beautiful visitor center, climb the dunes and hike through backdune forests. Participants will keep track of birds encountered on personal checklists. Pack a bag lunch and water bottle.

**COST: \$80.** Arrangements may be made to drop your child directly at your door! Advance registration required. Limited enrollment.

# 2012 Summer Day Camp Preview

Below is a tentative schedule of Nature Discovery's popular summer day camps for 2012. More detailed information for each offered week will appear on the website by mid-March. However, enrollment is open from now until the rosters are full. All day camps will run Monday thru Thursday of the targeted week. Full day (FD) camps run from 9am to 3pm. Half day (HD) camps, 9am to Noon. The fee for full day camps is \$180 (\$90 non-refundable deposit). Half day camps, \$95 (\$45 non-refundable deposit). After care options are available for most weeks, as well. Do not send a check prior to phone or email communication with us. Availability of an opening for your child must first be confirmed. Feel free to contact us for more details about any of the offerings below.

As in past years, we will also be teaching several weeks of summer youth classes at Lansing Community College (East campus). Details will appear along with the detailed summer schedule in mid-March.

## SUMMER 2012 SCHEDULE of WEEKS



June 18-21	Michigan Birds & Birding (FD - 9 yrs & older)
June 25-28	Birding for Visually-impaired (FD - 10 yrs & older – see page 3)
July 9-12	Nature Discovery (FD – 7 to 8 yrs)
July 16-19	Budding Naturalists (HD or FD – 5 to 6 yrs)
July 23-26	Free-Range Naturalist (FD – 5 <sup>th</sup> gr or older – see opening essay)
July 30-Aug 2	Okemos Nursery School Students' Week (HD)
August 6-9	MI Reptiles & Amphibians (FD - 9 yrs & older)
August 20-23	Insect Collecting (FD – 9 yrs & older)
August 27-30	Insect Collecting for MS/HS Students (FD)

## “Breeding Birds of the U.P.” Tour

In the works... This 4-5 day guided tour for adults in Michigan's Upper Peninsula will take place from Wednesday, June 13 to Saturday or Sunday, June 16 or 17. Our goal is to experience as many species as possible, emphasizing locations to tally specific U.P. gems, like Connecticut Warbler, LeConte's Sparrow and the endangered Yellow Rail. All transportation will be provided for an intimate group of only 4 participants. Watch for details on the website in the coming weeks. Please contact us any time for more information.

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