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Natural Diversity Education: Cause & Effect

It's all about natural diversity... Educationally, we see it as a simple, three-step, cause-and-effect process. Recognize – value – preserve. Recognition of natural diversity leads to the development of a sense of value toward it. Valuing natural diversity leads to the desire to preserve it.

Conversely, if a child, or anyone any age, is denied an education in recognizing natural diversity, this person is far more likely to make land use decisions that fail to take into account the natural diversity it supports.

It's no wonder we're steadily losing natural diversity around us. An overwhelming majority of adults today (including developers, builders, and others who bulldoze natural communities for profit and with the local government's blessing) can't tell one tree from another, one bird from another, one frog, turtle, butterfly, etc., from another, much less the components in the environment that allow each of them to exist. As a result, the living diversity that occupies a given space is viewed vaguely – even dismissed – as a mess of nameless, faceless obstacles that stand in the way of a self-serving goal. In today's society does this pervading attitude seem downright neanderthal to anyone else?

Science curricula in public schools, K through 12, are nearly devoid of natural diversity-specific education. Concepts, like food webs, life cycles, natural communities, and adaptations are presented to the students with simplistic or rudimentary components that fail to effectively and personally connect the student to his or her environment: the caterpillar eats the plant, the bird eats the caterpillar, the hawk eats the bird.

Public school systems should implement entire courses dedicated to the study of biological or natural diversity. There is enough of it in our state alone that weekly lessons could be taught in every grade, K through 12, on Michigan-specific natural diversity.

The sky's the limit when it comes to education about natural diversity and ecological relationships within our state and even around our homes. The Green-striped Grasshopper, a common, yet, widely overlooked insect on untreated lawns, is the only grasshopper species found here that overwinters in the nymph stage of its life cycle rather than in the egg stage. Bluebirds specialize in devouring ground-dwelling invertebrates which they spot from elevated perches over a lawn. In March, when insect prey is relatively scarce, these nymphs comprise a substantial portion of the bluebird's diet. On a sunny March day see if you can find Green-striped Grasshopper nymphs on your lawn.

To help anyone envision the implementation of such courses, we can point to our own weekly lessons that delve into Michigan natural diversity at three private schools – Montessori Children’s House in Lansing, Stepping Stones Montessori in East Lansing and Okemos Nursery School. The lessons are delivered mostly from a seasonal perspective. This allows students to step outside and put their recently acquired knowledge to use immediately. For instance, chickadees began singing their high-pitched *teacher* breeding songs last month. Every student in every classroom can step outside any day and identify one “by ear.” The first Sandhill Cranes began migrating back into the area last week. Students can not only identify them by their calls, but name a number of ways that you can tell a crane from another tall wader, the Great Blue Heron, behaviorally and ecologically. How many adults can do that?

How are these lessons received? Just ask the students, the teachers and the parents. With few exceptions, natural science day is the child’s favorite day of the school week. Students return home brimming with excitement to share what they learned in their nature lesson with family members.

In a wildlife presentation to a general audience on, say, Michigan turtles, I’ll point out that in our allotted hour time span I’m merely rushing over tidbits of information about each of the ten Michigan species as I show them. I’ll add, however, that there is enough material to teach an entire course about



Where have the frogs gone? The Wood Frog is one of the first frogs to begin breeding in March. This and many other amphibians need vernal ponds and surrounding habitat to exist, yet, in Michigan over 75% of them have been destroyed. In any instance, take away a population’s ability to “make more of itself,” and you’ve effectively doomed it to local extinction.

Michigan turtles. “How would you like to have a whole class, once a week, for half of a school year called *Michigan Turtles?*” I’ll ask an elementary school-aged student in the audience. Eyes light up. “*Yeah!*” Some adults pipe up that they’d like it, too.

Carol is contracted to teach science for grades K through 3 at Lansing’s Fairview Elementary School. Like other teachers in the public schools, she is bound to cover the state-required core curriculum for each grade. Yet, at every opportunity, she introduces some form of live Michigan wildlife to the students, mostly from our zoo of Michigan reptiles and amphibians, to illustrate a concept. Other times, she finds that a mandated science topic requires too many weeks of “busy work” for the students, long beyond their having grasped it. So, she’ll slip in a bonus lesson about wood frogs, tiger salamanders or water snakes. It’s no surprise that students at Fairview love science class.

Kids can’t get enough of this type of education. It’s as if they are wired to learn about it. We say, if they want to learn about it, give it to them! To proceed with the status quo and ignore both, natural diversity and our children’s natural affinity toward learning about it, we continue to do them and the unraveling environment they inherit from us an unnecessary and inexcusable disservice.

-Jim McGrath

Catch Nature Discovery on WLNZ Radio’s Coffee Break on March 5

Jim is scheduled to appear on Tuesday, March 5 at 9:30am, discussing blackbirds and bluebirds. 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 Facebook.





A male bluebird stakes his claim.

Photo © Steve Sage

Open Hours

*Sunday, March 10,
1 to 5 pm; \$5 Admission*

2pm Presentation

Providing for Bluebirds and other Cavity-nesting Songbirds

Bluebirds, chickadees, titmice and nuthatches begin searching for, and claiming nesting cavities throughout the month of March. Put a box up this month, and be amazed at how quickly birds begin to inspect it. At 2pm, we'll feature ***Providing for Bluebirds & Other Cavity-nesters***, a Powerpoint presentation featuring the array of "secondary" cavity-nesters - birds which, unlike woodpeckers, cannot excavate their own cavity, but must find an existing one. We'll also cover the life histories of two alien cavity-nesting birds, the house sparrow and European starling, which routinely destroy eggs, nestlings, and even kill adult birds in their drive to reproduce. We'll cover the best ways to deter them, and in so doing, maximize the nesting success of your backyard bluebirds and others. After the presentation we'll spend time viewing boxes in the yard, walk the trail and identify birds by sight and sound. Don't forget binoculars!

We'll have a limited number of bluebird nesting boxes for sale (\$17). With advance notice, if you'd like to build it yourself, we can also supply pre-cut pieces, nails and screws as a kit for you to take home and build. We will also demonstrate a highly effective removable nest box trap accessory, available for sale (\$10). If you have a persistent house sparrow that has claimed a box in your yard, this will help you catch it. Feel free to contact us in advance to reserve a box or a trap.

With the aid of our staff, visit our highly interactive Michigan reptiles & amphibians zoo. Hold a snake, feed some turtles, drop a cricket to a frog. Enjoy the action at our bird feeders or ask for your own personalized guided walk on the trail.

Need help erecting a box in your yard? One of our staff can dig a hole, sink a post and install one for a reasonable fee. Contact us!

If you place a box on in an open area and it hasn't been claimed by April, a pair of Tree Swallows may take up residence.

Photo © Steve Sage





Michigan Owls & “Owling”

Wednesday, March 13, 7 to 9pm

This is our last owling night until next winter. The evening begins with a Powerpoint presentation over hot beverages and cookies. *Michigan Owls* features all ten species found in the state, and 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. Contact us for advance enrollment. Not recommended for preschool children.

In a January program, this ultra-cooperative Eastern Screech Owl flew right in, whistled back to the recording, and endured a flashlight beam in its face for over 20 minutes before our group finally decided to leave.

Birding at Maple River

Saturday, March 16;

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, to tally as many birds as possible. Mid-March offers opportunity to view lingering wintering birds from the north as well as first looks of the year at our state’s earliest migrants returning north, like Sandhill Cranes, Killdeer, Red-winged Blackbirds, Robins, Meadowlarks and a host of waterfowl species, especially if there is open water. We’ll get out there at first light for a chance to find displaying American Woodcock and hooting Great-horned Owls. By morning’s end we may have tallied as many as 50 species! All participants will receive a Michigan Birds checklist on which to keep track 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 day’s birds. COST: \$35, includes all transportation. If you are located close to our route, arrangements can be made to pick you up on the way. Advance reservations required.



Ring-necked Duck.

Photo by Steve Sage.

Catch Us at These Events in March...

Quiet Water Symposium

Saturday, March 2. MSU Pavilion. Jim will be presenting *Live Michigan Turtles* at 1:30pm. Nature Discovery will also have a table set-up with Michigan Turtles and other native reptiles and amphibians throughout the day. For more info visit www.quietwatersymposium.org.

Michigan Bluebird Society Spring Bluebird Festival

Saturday, March 23. Woldumar Nature Center. Jim will be presenting “Birding by Ear” at 1:10pm followed by a short walk outside to identify bird songs and entice them closer with recordings. For more information visit www.michiganbluebirds.org.

Spring Break Camp and Field Trip...



Spring Break Wildlife Day Camp

Tuesday & Wednesday, 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 of 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.

Kensington Metropark Field Trip

Thursday, April 4, 9am-3pm.

For 3rd 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 check out the Great Blue Heron rookery, hike trails around abundant wetlands, woods and fields, visit the nature center. Hand-feeding birds, too!

COST: \$55. Pack a bag lunch and water bottle, and be sure to dress appropriately for weather conditions. Advance registration required.



Climate Change Realist

Finally! Have you noticed? Coverage of climate change in the media has risen noticeably in the last few months. As scientific evidence continues to mount and climatic catastrophes increasingly dominate world news, fewer Americans are buying the denialist camp's packaged product, and mainstream media are having a difficult time ignoring it. One might be inclined to say *better late than never*, except for the realization that we wouldn't be so irreversibly deep down the rabbit hole toward a dangerous new world if our nation had begun to take the threat more seriously twenty years ago.

Beginning March 1, *USA Today* kicked-off a series of regular reports entitled *Weathering the Change*. See the link below. One video gives a clear, two-minute lesson explaining the greenhouse effect. Every American fifth grader should be given such a lesson. The understanding of this process provides anyone a sound basis to aid in evaluating the validity of conflicting arguments regarding climate change.

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/02/28/climate-change-remaking-america/1917169/>

2013 Summer Day Camp Preview

Below is a tentative schedule of Nature Discovery's popular summer day camps for 2013. 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 be teaching several weeks of summer youth classes at Lansing Community College (East campus). Again, watch for details for all classes and camps on the website in mid-March as well as in updates in upcoming newsletters.

SUMMER 2013 SCHEDULE of WEEKS

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|---------------|---|
| June 17-20 | Michigan Birds & Birding (FD - 9 yrs & older) |
| June 24-27 | Nature Discovery (FD – 7-9 yrs) |
| July 22-25 | Budding Naturalists (HD or FD option – 5-6 yrs) |
| July 29-Aug 1 | Okemos Nursery School Students' Week (HD) |
| August 5-8 | MI Reptiles & Amphibians (FD - 9 yrs & older) |
| August 26-29 | Insect Collecting (FD – 9 yrs & older) |

Become a fan of *Nature Discovery* on Facebook!
Check out our Youtube channel, *Wild Williamston*, too!

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