



*A male House Sparrow will kill eggs, young and adults of other species to gain a nesting cavity. Photo © Steve Sage.*

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# ***The Trouble with House Sparrows***

Before divulging the unpleasant details of our war on House Sparrows it bears mentioning that this is not a native North American bird. Purposefully introduced from Europe in the mid-to-late 1800s it has spread coast to coast and is now considered the most populous bird on the continent. By 1900 it was evident that its introduction here was a grave mistake – an avian disaster story. This bird, along with the European Starling, is classified as a noxious pest by our federal government. The Norway Rat and the House Mouse are members of the same club. This bird has evolved a close association with humans and their structures and will cram its messy nest into any crack or crevice it can find on a building. It consumes grain on farms and is known to spread diseases through livestock, largely through its feces.

Its ecological impact on native North American songbird populations is well-documented – especially cavity-nesting species. This bird is such an aggressive cavity-nester, its presence in any landscape is believed to actually suppress populations of native cavity-nesting songbirds. This list includes some of our most beloved and well-known birds: bluebirds, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, tree swallows, wrens and more.

The Eastern Bluebird, a specialist in consuming ground-dwelling insects, underwent serious declines beginning in the late 1950s and through the '60s. The rising popularity and usage of DDT to control mosquitoes and other insects was largely to blame. By the late '60s the bluebird had become very rare. After DDT was banned in this country, the bluebird was expected – as seen in populations of other insect-eating birds – to rebound. However, through the '70s it continued to remain relatively rare.

Dr. Lawrence Zeleny, widely-considered the “father of bluebird conservation,” found that bluebirds were experiencing difficulty in finding suitable, available nesting cavities because rural landscapes had become dominated by House Sparrows. He encouraged citizens to erect nesting boxes in appropriate habitat specifically for bluebirds. However, anyone who did so was urged to monitor the boxes to be certain House Sparrows were not allowed to move in. Today, thanks to Zeleny’s impetus, national, state, and local bluebird conservation organizations are everywhere.

Don’t look for sympathy for the House Sparrow on the website of a bluebird organization or at one of its meetings. While all native songbirds and their nests are completely protected by federal law, citizens are

encouraged to treat the House Sparrow and European Starling as they would the Norway Rat, and members of these clubs do.

Understandably, many people are uncomfortable with the idea of killing any vertebrate animal. That's why most of these societies offer passive or non-lethal options for dealing with House Sparrows. However, all make it perfectly clear that these methods are inefficient or of limited effectiveness, at best. One bluebird book author, after stating his no-kill philosophy, recommended driving a live-trapped bird at least twenty miles away to release it. Of course, the flip-sides to this strategy are 1) that, provided it stays put at the point of release, you just donated one bird to another area's House Sparrow problem, and, 2) House Sparrows, like many other birds, are superb "homers." The bird might beat you back to your house, for the time and gas wasted.

About fifteen years ago, I caught a live female House Sparrow in one of our bluebird boxes. I brought the bird into Stepping Stones Montessori in East Lansing for a live lesson and told the students I wanted to mark the bird before release to positively identify it should it turn up again. We wrapped a piece of bright yellow tape around one leg then released it in front of the school – exactly ten miles from our house as the sparrow flies. Three days later she was foraging within a flock of other sparrows beneath the feeders outside our window.

We've erected and monitored bluebird boxes on our property since we moved here in 1989. If House Sparrows attempted to nest in one, I would either remove the nest or trap one of the birds in the box using an insect net. To do this I would quietly sneak behind the box, then hold the net over the opening. A knock on the box would send the sparrow into the net.

However, in the spring of 2010, frustration with the House Sparrows' aggressive behavior toward native birds drove me to take the battle up a notch. In this particular spring we were pleased to see that a pair of chickadees had begun building a nest in the box attached to our clothesline pole (largely comprised of moss and animal hair) while a pair of bluebirds had begun building in a box in front of our house. Egg-laying in each box ensued. Then, upon arriving home one afternoon, I stepped out our back door to check on the turtles in the kiddie pool on our patio. My eyes immediately locked on something else floating on the surface – a couple of small clumps of moss. On the nesting box nearby another clump of moss hung from the lip of the hole. The chickadee nest had been raided. Six small, white eggs, had been pecked open and pitched to the ground below. Minutes later, after I stepped inside the door, a male sparrow alit on the box and began cheeping loudly to let area females know he had secured an available nesting site.

Only five days later, a scene with a similar ending occurred in the front box. In late afternoon I returned from a teaching assignment. As I slowed the car to turn into the driveway I noticed, not a bluebird, but a female House Sparrow perched atop the box. A vigilant bluebird would never tolerate a House Sparrow landing on a box in which it was nesting. I parked the car and ran to the box. The sparrow flew into the branches of a nearby tree. Four bluebird eggs lay destroyed on the ground below. That spring, no bluebirds or chickadees nested in our boxes – although they would have liked to. I spent the rest of the breeding weeks repeatedly tearing House Sparrow nests from the boxes.

Before the following spring I researched different types of House Sparrow traps on the market and settled on purchasing two styles. The Van Ert snap trap works similarly to a mouse trap, but not lethally. It is mounted on the inside front wall of the box below the hole. When the bird enters and alights on a trip wire, the door



snaps shut over the hole trapping the bird inside. The manufacturer warns that this trap is only to be inserted in the box when a House Sparrow is seen to have “claimed” the box (as mentioned above). The box should be checked regularly through the day to ensure that, if sprung, a non-target bird has not been trapped inside. We’ve had excellent success with this over the past few springs. Eventually, each year, a pair of bluebirds has nested successfully after a few territorial House Sparrows have been removed.

The other is a self-resetting cage trap. Sparrows are attracted to seed on a tray at the cage’s opening. When a bird hops onto a screen on the end of a fulcrum to get at the seed, it lowers the bird into the cage. When the bird hops off the screen, the counter-weight raises it to its original position to catch the next bird. Again, non-target birds get into the trap almost daily. I have had to reach in and liberate a good many tree sparrows, juncos and titmice this winter, but we’ve captured about 35 House Sparrows, and thus, anticipate even less competition with the natives this coming spring.



I take no delight in killing House Sparrows. Hey, it’s not their fault. As is the case with nearly all invasive plants and animals, people created the problem. However, in the name of aiding populations of native cavity-nesting birds (and a lack of viable alternatives) I’ve resigned myself to doing the dirty work. I prefer to euthanize the House Sparrows by drowning. A submerged bird drowns in about fifteen seconds. My son’s method, and one suggested on many bluebird sites, is a firm pinch into the neck vertebrae – with nearly instantaneous results. I’ve got to get myself used to that.

Another method combines education *and* sustenance (Not *Joy of Cooking House Sparrows*). Michigan’s three constrictors, the rat, fox and milk snake, prey on small mammals and birds in the wild. We’ve got three rat snakes and one fox snake large enough to catch, constrict and devour an adult House Sparrow. For anyone who would like to see how a constrictor does its thing, we can accommodate. It’s interesting and impressive, but not gory at all.

Despite the lingering wintry conditions, songbird breeding behavior is more strongly driven by the increasing length of daylight than the weather. A number of cavity-nesters are already beginning to establish ties to nesting sites in early March. Next Sunday, March 9, attend our presentation, *Providing for Bluebirds and Other Cavity Nesting Songbirds*. Nesting boxes are available for demonstration and for sale. We will also show participants the Van Ert trap in action. A number of these are also for sale at a discounted rate.

The Michigan Bluebird Society’s annual Bluebird Festival is being held in Traverse City on Saturday, March 29 ([www.michiganbluebirdsociety.org](http://www.michiganbluebirdsociety.org)). The Society has contracted me to give a “Birding by Ear” presentation at the event. I will be driving up that morning and returning later the same day. If you are interested in attending, I can do the driving. Just call or email.

-Jim McGrath



## **Catch Nature Discovery on Coffee Break Monday, March 17**

Jim is scheduled to appear on Monday, March 17 at 9:45am, discussing cavity-nesting birds and House Sparrows. The show airs weekdays from 9 to 10am on 89.7 FM. Listen live online at [lcc.edu/radio/onair/](http://lcc.edu/radio/onair/) or watch it live (or later in the day at 6pm) online at [lcc.edu/tv/watch](http://lcc.edu/tv/watch). We’ll post a reminder on our Facebook fan page.



## Open Hours

*Sunday, March 9,  
1 to 5 pm; \$5 Admission*

2pm Presentation

*Providing*

*for Bluebirds*

*and other Cavity-nesting Songbirds*

Photo © Steve Sage

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 (\$16). 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





Hooded Merganser

Photo © Steve Sage

# *Maple River Early Spring Birding Day*

## *Monday, March 24 6am to 1pm*

Join an intimate guided trip in our minivan to Maple River State Game Area north of St. Johns, followed by a stop at Park Lake on the way back to check out migrant waterfowl through our spotting scope. Tundra Swans stop at Maple River wetlands in late March along with a host of other waterfowl - up to 20 species. Jim knows where two active Great Horned Owl nests are located, as well as two Bald Eagle nests. We stop on roadside and view them up-close through our spotting scope. As many as 50 other species are in store, too. Participants will be given bird checklists to keep track of the day's finds. Feel free to pack any food/drink you like to consume on the road through the morning.

Enrollment is limited to five. Children must be accompanied by an adult. Advance registration required. FEE: \$45, includes all transportation to and from Nature Discovery. Arrangements may also be made to pick up /drop off at your door or another convenient location.

## *Around the State in March*

- ❖ ***Saturday, March 8: 10:30am. Bluebirds Presentation; Fremont District Library.***
- ❖ ***Thursday, March 13: 6-7:30pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Ralya Elementary, Haslett.***
- ❖ ***5-7pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Rose City Elementary, Rose City.***
- ❖ ***Friday, March 21: 6:30-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Hiawatha Elementary, Okemos.***
- ❖ ***Thursday, March 27: 6:30-8:30pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Donley Elementary, East Lansing.***
- ❖ ***7pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Presentation; Ada Township Park.***
- ❖ ***Saturday, March 29: 1:15pm. Birding by Ear Presentation; Michigan Bluebird Festival; Hagerty Conf. Center, Traverse City.***



## *“Breeding Birds of the U.P.” Tour, June 2-6, 2014*



*A Trumpeter Swan sunset at Seney National Wildlife Refuge.*

Join our economical 5-day guided tour in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula within an intimate group of no more than 5 people. Our goal is to experience as many species as possible, emphasizing locations to tally specific U.P. gems, like Connecticut Warbler, LeConte’s Sparrow, Upland Sandpiper. Destinations include Kirtland’s Warbler habitat on our way north, Munuscong Marsh, Whitefish Point, Seney National Wildlife Refuge, and more. On the 2012 trip the group tallied 129 species! COST: \$650 (\$250 deposit), includes all transportation, lodging, 4 breakfasts and 4 road-lunches. Any child is welcome to attend accompanied by an adult. Contact us to enroll or for more information.

## *2014 Summer Day Camp Preview*

Below is a tentative schedule of Nature Discovery’s popular summer day camps for 2014. 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. Due to a decrease in enrollment we are offering fewer weeks than past years. However, our new Free-Range Camp offered for select students over many days of the summer (details below) may be a perfect fit for your nature enthusiast. All day camps will run Monday thru Thursday of the targeted week. Full day (FD) camps run from 9am to 3pm (Birding, 8-2). Half day (HD) camps, 9am to Noon, also have a full-day option. The fee for full day camps is \$190 (\$95 non-refundable deposit). Half day camps, \$100 (\$50 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.

Carol 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 2014 SCHEDULE of WEEKS***

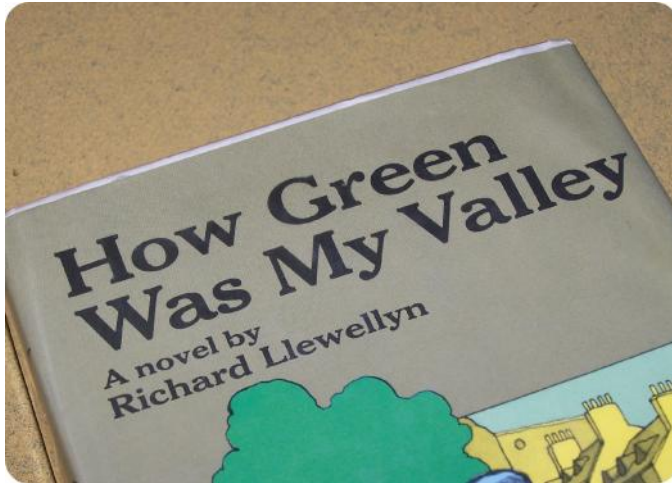
- June 16-19 Birds & Birding (FD - 9 yrs & older)
- June 23-26 Nature Discovery (FD – 7 to 8 yrs)
- July 28-31 Budding Naturalists (HD/FD – 5 to 6 yrs)
- Aug 4-7 MI Reptiles & Amphibians (FD - 9 yrs & older)
- Aug 25-28 Advanced Insect Collecting (FD – 11 & older)

Free Range Camp: Any students, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and older who have had previous experience with us (through camps or through Montessori schools) with a special interest in nature are invited to enroll in this special “un-camp.” We provide the resources and the intimate setting, your student has full access to the animals, the yard, the property and our staff to do whatever he or she is in the mood for. Take a box turtle for a walk or a rat snake for a climb, collect insects to start your own pinned collection or feed them to hungry frogs and salamanders,



climb a tree, take nature photos, raise caterpillars, and much more. The possibilities are endless and up to him or her. We are aiming to keep enrollment on any day to no more than three free-range students. A list of potential dates will be posted on the summer camp flyer due on the website by mid-March. Pick your own days. Create your own hours any time between 8am and 5pm on available days. Our fee will be based on a rate of \$7/hr.

## *CCR – How Green Was My Planet*



My daughter's AP English class includes the reading and analysis of a long list of influential novels, i.e., *Gone With the Wind*, *The Fountainhead*, *Crime & Punishment*, *Exodus*, etc. Carol and I have read some of these same novels many years ago, either as a school assignment or on our own. Others we've never read. Thus, we've found ourselves picking up our own copy of one of the assigned novels and reading it, too. It has been a pleasure becoming immersed in serious, often lengthy discussions about various characters, themes, reflections and social implications of a specific work with Lily.

*How Green Was My Valley*, by Richard Llewellyn, published in 1943, is a fictionalized version of his youth and a reflection of rural life in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Wales. The story is narrated by the main character, Huw Morgan, as an old man fondly and wistfully reminiscing the details of his youth, his family, his community and the once-verdant environment that surrounded them.

The story's beautiful composition belies the tragedy of the exploitation and ultimate destruction of a people and their land in the name of profit for a few wealthy magnates. Nearly all the men in his community and the surrounding valleys have few employment options beyond work in the coal mines. The mine owners know this and deliberately keep wages low to increase their own profit-margin. Meanwhile, a tremendous, unending torrent of coal mining waste – slag – is carted out of the mines and dumped into heaps that transform into ashy, gray, toxic mountains among the communities of the very people who mine it. Early in the novel, little Huw's vision of the slag heap as it slides down a slope near his home to spill into the river, blackening the water and killing the life within it, foreshadows the inevitable fate of the people and the entire countryside.

The parallel is hard to ignore. *How Green Was My Valley* has gone global. Unsettlingly, in a mere hundred years, the story is the same, but the characters and the setting have spread to a worldwide stage that's further complicated by rampant technological advances and sophisticated corporate/political rhetoric meant to discredit or marginalize critics.

If you haven't read it pick it up at the library.

[http://act.350.org/letter/kxl-feis/?sp\\_ref=30910286.6.3364.o.1.2](http://act.350.org/letter/kxl-feis/?sp_ref=30910286.6.3364.o.1.2)

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