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To Kill a Hognose Snake

Thank you to Kathy and Jim Bricker, and Straits Area Audubon for their continued support of Nature Discovery and our programs. For the fifth consecutive year SAAS has invited us to present not only at one of their monthly meetings, but has also raised funds for Nature Discovery to give Michigan Snakes Alive presentations to fifth grade classrooms in northern schools. On February 11-12 we presented at Cheboygan Middle School and at Wolverine School. We also presented The Secret Lives of Michigan Salamanders at the SAAS February meeting.

The fifth grade boy announced it matter-of-factly. "I killed five hognose snakes last summer." The venue - a presentation in mid-February at Wolverine School.

In that case, I told him, I was here more for him than almost any of the other twenty classmates in attendance. I added that I would attempt to change his attitude toward snakes so completely that he would likely never harm one again the rest of his life. His expression was doubtful, yet, I secretly relished the transformation that was about to transpire. Such is the raw, behavior-altering power of acquired knowledge.

The root of the question as to why we are losing natural diversity around us lies in a broader lack of education. People who have not been taught to recognize natural diversity (It is severely lacking in our public schools.) and the myriad ecological relationships borne from such diversity, are in no position to make decisions that safeguard it as they work or recreate on the landscape. Thus, many species decline due to erosion of their habitat at the hands of a largely undereducated society.

While habitat loss also contributes to the decline of many species of snakes, these wrongly-vilified reptiles suffer greatly from a much more direct threat - firsthand persecution. The habitat may be intact



A Cheboygan Middle School fifth grader gets acquainted with our gentle Northern Water Snake. This species is frequently, and erroneously, called a "Water Moccasin."

yet the snakes that should occupy it have been purposely wiped out by local adults and kids who harbor negative, discolored, or flat-out wrong information.

They learned it, not within a carefully thought-out lesson plan in a formal school setting from a qualified instructor, but in haphazard snippets from random, largely-unqualified acquaintances. The “lessons” are informal and the “facts” unmonitored, dispensed by “teachers” who may otherwise be known as trusted friends or relatives. Overprotective parents, snake-killing cousins, and ophidiophobic friends may avidly fill the role. They, in turn, learned it from similarly sketchy sources, and so it goes.

Negative feelings toward a wild snake’s imagined sinister intentions conjures a fearful reaction. In young and old - and, more often in males - the fear is often translated into aggression toward the animal.

For these fifth graders I began the presentation with this question: “Which of you are willing to admit that you are at least a little nervous about snakes?” I pulled a large Black Rat Snake out of a cloth bag. Facial expressions and body language gave a first response. The majority of hands went up. Before the conclusion of our time together, I announced, they would have an opportunity to touch live snakes, handle them, and even “wear” one of our six-foot rat snakes. Many expressed excitement over the chance, but just as many shook their heads muttering the likes of, “I’m not getting near that thing.”



Over the course of the hour more snakes were introduced. Solid identification and behavioral information was dispensed as each one was carried in turn among rows of fifth graders by SAAS members, Kathy, Jim, Rose or Dale. A steady, mass-desensitization was under way. When removed from the bag, snake after snake displayed the same non-threatened, unaggressive, calmly exploratory demeanor. Reluctant students were never forced to touch one, yet, they watched with piqued fascination as their classmates petted them without incident.

In some respects part of the lesson began to take on a psychological or sociological slant... I offered tips to help the students determine whether they are receiving accurate information about snakes from a friend, household member or other acquaintance.

Is the person discussing snakes in a negative light? Does the person say he or she hates snakes? If so, be careful of the validity of any information coming from this person’s mouth. Without exception – and this is based on a lifetime of discussing snakes with thousands of people - those who know and understand snakes invariably *like* them. In contrast, when I am conversing with anyone who conveys any negative mien in their statements about snakes, my pat response is “You need to learn more about snakes.”

...Which is exactly what these students did. When “free-handling time” finally arrived, each class was positively *geeked* to get at the snakes. Through seven classrooms and hundreds of fifth grade students not a single one turned down the up-close, hands-on opportunity. Positive statements were peppered through simultaneous conversations around the room: “This is so cool!” “I can’t believe I’m holding a snake!” “It’s so smooth!” “It’s tickling my neck!” “I want a pet snake.” “Can I keep this snake?” When it was time to collect them from shoulders and cradling arms most students were reluctant, if not sad, to relinquish them.

I delivered these parting words as they thanked us and headed out the door: Teach someone at home, be nice to wild snakes, and *never* condone anyone who kills snakes. They wholeheartedly agreed. Kathy,

Jim, Rose, Dale and I are quite confident that few snakes will be killed under *these* students' cumulative watches this summer.

Among a number of small groups scattered around the classroom, each was helped and monitored by me or one of my adult assistants. Jim Bricker monitored one of the groups at Wolverine School which happened to include the self-proclaimed hognose snake killer mentioned at the onset. Jim shared these observations about the boy's experience...



This fifth grade boy admitted killing snakes, but is likely to never kill another after this experience.

During the snake-handling time, I decided to let this boy experience one first-hand after he had heard from Jim there is nothing to fear. I took the Eastern Hognose back to where he was sitting in order to let him get acquainted with this beautiful snake. The boy started out being very fearful of the snake and did not want to hold or touch it. His hands were even shaking. Meanwhile, fellow students came back and held the snake near him and chided him for killing snakes. He defended himself by saying that a neighbor woman had told him that the snake was on her porch and asked him to kill it. I am not sure how many snakes he actually had killed, as his story changed as he talked more.

The lad watched other students enjoy holding the snake. After we all assured him of the snake's gentleness he finally, very tentatively, let me put the snake on his arms. He was wearing a long-sleeve shirt so it didn't touch his skin. After a period of having it so close and watching it move, the boy slowly grew more accepting and finally began to touch it. Eventually, he posed for a picture proudly holding it. When the time came to leave, he vied with others for the privilege of being the last one to hold it, then placed it carefully back into the bag.

Transformation complete.

Imagine fifth graders in every Michigan school having the opportunity to receive legitimate education to help them understand, respect and appreciate wild snakes they encounter. Why stop there? The development and implementation of a broad Michigan-specific wildlife curriculum is possible for grades K through 12. There is that much to learn. Michigan Snakes class would share the curricular stage with classes on Michigan Insects, Michigan Frogs, Michigan Salamanders, Michigan Turtles, Michigan Birds, Michigan Mammals, Michigan Trees, Michigan Wildflowers, and so much more.

I often will ask an audience of public school students if they think they would like, not a mere hour lesson on a topic as broad as Michigan snakes (or turtles, etc.) but a regular course on the topic that lasts an entire semester. The positive response is overwhelming. Why not give our kids what they show a natural affinity to learn? Formal Michigan-specific wildlife education will not just make their lives in the environment more interesting. They will develop a level of connectivity and a desire toward active stewardship of their state's living resources that, looking around, appears impossible to attain without it.

-Jim McGrath

Open Hours

Sunday, March 15

1 to 5pm; \$5 admission

2pm Presentation

The Lives of Michigan Blackbirds



A male red-winged blackbird uses its red “epaulettes” and its voice to defend a breeding territory in the cattails.
Photo © Steve Sage

As the first blackbird species begin to migrate back into the state this month attend this informative presentation featuring Powerpoint images and audio recordings to help you learn and appreciate them more thoroughly. All black birds are not necessarily blackbirds, and not all blackbirds are black birds, either! Each of ten species in the state vary remarkably in their plumage, habitats, ranges, songs and ecologies. Some are brilliantly-colored. Others are rare and declining. One species evolved a specialized ecology to fill a habitat niche that has since been destroyed by man. Now the bird has become an ecological disaster that negatively affects our songbird populations. Find out where to go to see blackbird species that are completely overlooked by most citizens.



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

Lots of opportunity for all ages to visit and interact with our huge zoo of Michigan-native snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders, too!

Catch Nature Discovery on Coffee Break Monday, March 23

Jim is scheduled to appear on Monday, March 23 at 9:45am, discussing seasonal wildlife. 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 our Facebook fan page.



Maple River Early Spring Birding Day

*Tuesday, March 31
6am to 1pm*



Hooded Merganser

Photo © Steve Sage

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 up to 20 species of other waterfowl. Jim knows where active Great Horned Owl nests are located, as well as Bald Eagle nests. We will stop on roadsides to 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

- ❖ *Sunday, March 8: 2:45pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Presentation; Wildflower Association of Michigan Annual Meeting, MSU.*
- ❖ *Thursday, March 19: 6-7:30pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Ralya Elementary, Haslett.*
- ❖ *6-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Whitehills Elementary, E. Lansing.*
- ❖ *Friday, March 20: 6:30-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Hiawatha Elem, Okemos.*
- ❖ *Tuesday, March 24: 6-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Donley Elementary, East Lansing.*
- ❖ *Thursday, March 26: 6-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Olivet College, Olivet.*
- ❖ *Friday, March 27: 6:30-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Beagle Elem, Grand Ledge.*
- ❖ *Saturday, March 28: 1:15pm. Birding by Ear Presentation; Michigan Bluebird Festival; Muskegon Community College.*



2015 Summer Day Camp Preview

Below is a tentative schedule of Nature Discovery's popular summer day camps for 2015. More detailed information for each offered week will appear on the website later in 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 (Birding, 8-2). Half day (HD) camps, 9am to Noon, also have a full-day option. The fee for full day camps is \$200 (\$100 non-refundable deposit). Half day camps, \$110 (\$55 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 the coming weeks.

SUMMER 2015 Tentative Schedule of Weeks

June 22-25: Birds & Birding (FD - 9 yrs & older)

July 6-9: Nature Discovery (FD - 7 to 8 yrs)

July 13-16: Budding Naturalists (HD/FD - 5 to 6 yrs)

July 27-30: Butterflies & Moths (9 yrs and older)

Aug 3-6: Reptiles & Amphibians (FD - 9 yrs & older)

Pizza? Hold the Palm Oil, Please



Twenty years ago you would have been hard-pressed to find palm oil listed as an ingredient in your cookies, chips, fast food, or cosmetics. Now, unnoticed by the majority of consumers, roughly half of all products we consume list it as an ingredient. Better living through palm oil? Consumers didn't miss it then, and most are oblivious that they are consuming it now. Yet, multi-national corporations looking no further than their bottom line are contributing to rainforest deforestation and all the associated fallout, from tremendous net carbon emissions to habitat loss to a variety of human rights violations.

According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil, assembled in 2004 to ostensibly promote acquisition from environmentally-sound sources, has compiled inadequate standards to reduce the environmental-impact. Thus, a consumer who tries to make a more environmentally-sound choice by purchasing a product labeled "certified" by the RSPO may be in for a rude awakening.

In 2014 UCS compiled a scorecard that ranks the thirty largest corporations from various ethical angles regarding their hand in palm oil production and usage:

http://www.ucsusa.org/global_warming/solutions/stop-deforestation/palm-oil-scorecard.html#.VPnU33zF_E0

Here is a report on some most recent efforts to hold corporations more responsible.

http://www.ran.org/organizations_seek_stronger_labor_protections_corporate_responsibility_in_palm_oil_industry

We've become very aware, now, of all purchases we make and refuse anything with palm oil listed as an ingredient, until we can be assured the source is specifically certified under more stringent guidelines than those of RSPO. The number of products we once bought regularly, and no longer do now is staggering, yet, we feel our quality of life has, in fact, probably improved (less junk food, for one).

Like pizza? Last week I decided to spend an extra fifteen minutes in Meijer's frozen pizza aisle to peruse the ingredients of all twelve brands available. Nine listed no palm oil. Of the three that did, we've bought two of them in the past. Not anymore. Red Baron, California Pizza Kitchen, and Dr. Oetker Ristorante are officially black-listed.

Now, how to start monitoring fast food...? Unsettlingly, virtually every major chain received poor grades on UCS's scorecard.

-JM



Barb Meiner, DVM

Last weekend Nature Discovery led a small group on a winter birding trip to the Eastern U.P. Barb Meiner, a vet and avid photographer, shared her beautiful photos here of a Sharp-tailed

Grouse and a Snowy Owl. For more of Barb's beautiful photos of owls, grouse, a fox, an ermine, and more encountered on our trip visit Nature Discovery's Facebook fan page, then consider coming along on one of our future outings!



Barb Meiner, DVM

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