Nature Discovery WILD TIMES

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A Song Sparrow vocalizes. *Photo by Greg Smith.*

THIS ISSUE

Birding by Ear: A March 'Birder's Dozen'

Anyone who acquires an appreciation for wild birds soon comes to this realization: No matter how thoroughly you come to recognize birds in your vicinity by sight, attaining the ability to identify them *by ear* launches you to a stratosphere of avian awareness that blows away identification by sight alone. Develop this skill and it may well enhance your perspective of the natural world outside your door for the rest of your life. I'd like to help.

Before continuing, STOP! If you don't yet have it on your cell phone (or other device), please humor me and take a few minutes now to install the free app *Merlin*: https://merlin.allaboutbirds.org/. Developed and distributed by Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology it is a must for anyone with even a passing interest in the wild birds that inhabit your surroundings. Once installed, keep the app open as you read to search and listen to vocalizations of specific birds as they are discussed in this column.

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Leading off the February 2021 *Wild Times* issue I wrote a column entitled, 'Birding by Ear: A February Primer' (http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Feb21.pdf). In it I highlighted some of the first birds - barely perceptible just weeks after the winter solstice - that begin to sing their breeding songs. It is a valuable preface to this column.

I cited early February as perhaps the best time of year to begin learning wild bird song around you. By then a half dozen or so of these 'first singers' are doing so - especially early in the morning - with increased regularity. I specifically highlighted the songs of the Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, House Finch, Northern Cardinal, and Carolina Wren as well as sound production from local woodpecker species - the Downy, Hairy, Red-bellied and Pileated - that begin to express territoriality by drumming in addition to vocalizing by early February.

By the *end* of February, the morning air has already become quite rich with avian sound. While all the birds mentioned above - each with its species-specific auditory messaging - commence in steadily greater numbers and frequency, one by one, more species enter the sound stage. One additional consideration

requires acknowledgement: the very first of the transient species that spent the winter to the south begin to return and vocalize. Once ajar, the migratory floodgates swing a bit wider with each passing week.

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Let's call this installment March's *'Birder's Dozen'* - wild birds beyond the above-mentioned startups that you may hear vocalizing in a typical rural or even semi-rural setting. For the record, this list is far from complete…

In mid-February, as is the case every year, I heard the first soft, scratchy notes delivered by a male **Eastern Bluebird**. The typical phrases are often phoneticized in field guides as *tru-tru-a-lee… tru-tru-a-loo*… A male on the wire over the lawn in our yard picks this particular place as a breeding territory expressly because of the two nesting boxes we installed here. A morning walk around our 'country block' (3.4 miles) now reveals vocalizations of as many as eight to ten scattered males, each having located a suitable nesting cavity, the area around which it has chosen to vocally claim.

Eastern Bluebird. *Photo by Steve Sage.*

As the last week of February approaches, I find myself anticipating the first, soft *Coo-aaah-coo-coo-coo-coo* of the **Mourning Dove** on an early morning walk; then, on a given morning, invariably hear it. Mere days after noting the first one - triggered perhaps by both the increasing day lengths and the territorial claims of their neighbors - Mourning Doves have begun cooing all over the place.

Before the calendar flips to March - some of the first returning migrants mentioned above show up amid their own vocal fanfare. It has already been a few weeks since the first **Red-winged Blackbirds** began speckling roadside marshes and fields. Arriving males quickly claim territories within the overgrowth then find high perches from which to spread wings and deliver their harsh *con-ca-reees.* Later arriving males get the message (http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Mar25.pdf).

Many **Sandhill Cranes** have already returned to farmland habitats; pairs bugling their own claims from field-side marshes where they will soon begin to nest-build. The primitive, staccato vocalizations echo across the agricultural airspace over great distances, directed specifically at any other cranes that fly within earshot.

Easier to miss with your eyes due to their streaky, brown, cryptic pattern, days before the calendar page turns, the first **Song Sparrows** have begun to sing their phoneticized *Maids-maids-maids-put-on-your-tea-kettle-ettle-ettle* from natural growth, often along roadsides in these same environs. By mid-March a singing male is positioned in the shrubbery every tenth-of-a-mile down most any country road.

Warm and wet a week into March? The stage is set for nature's perfect storm of incoming **American Robins**.

I wrote in the March 2023 issue about how 'the first Robin of spring' isn't really a thing any more: http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Mar23.pdf. Prior to the 2000s, you would have been hard-pressed to find one overwintering in lower Michigan; not anymore. In a nutshell, blame the shift not just on climate change but on the growing prevalence of invasive, berry-bearing shrubs and vines in our woodlands and along our roadsides. It has been many years since I have *not* seen a Robin throughout all twelve months of the year here.

If you happened to notice any Robins on your lawn - post-snow melt - over the past two weeks, these were almost certainly birds that spent the winter here. However, it's a mere handful relative to the number that

migrated south. The ambulant masses are poised to flood northward over the border in *very* short order. Watch your lawn…

An early Robin forages on the brown lawn.

Not long after arrival, pairs will stake claim to their own breeding territories through song. The word handle I most often share is *Cheer up, cheerily, cheer up, cheer up… Cheer up, cheerily, cheerily, cheer up…* Listen for your personal first Robin song of the year in the coming week.

In addition to the above-mentioned Song Sparrow, other native migrant sparrow species trickle from warmer climes into the state over the course of this month, then into April However, the two most common *winter*-resident sparrows – the rural feeder-visiting Dark-eyed Junco and American Tree Sparrow - will be trickling *out* of our area over the next month or so to return to northern breeding grounds. Indeed, the mobs of these two species under our feeders as described in last month's column wither to a scattered few holdouts by mid-April.

A few weeks ago, against a backdrop of snow they got along grandly, pecking shoulder to shoulder on the ground under our feeders. Now, despite not yet embarking to their breeding grounds, males of these two species demonstrate an increasing amount of testosterone coursing through their systems. They are growing quite short-tempered with one another. Should a male land adjacent to another feeding male, it gets driven back with a brief but aggressive flash of gaping beak and flailing wings. Despite being nowhere close to its breeding ground, with increased frequency through March a male Junco or Tree Sparrow also can't help bursting into song from a shrub or low tree limb.

The **Dark-eyed Junco** delivers a rapid, monotonous, liquid trill that lasts maybe two to three seconds. Through most of March I know of no other bird in this area with this song quality. However, as April approaches, your backyard **Chipping Sparrow** reappears from down south. It also delivers a rapid-fire, monotonous trill. However, the quality is described as 'dry' in contrast to the more melodious trill of the Junco. Furthermore, the Chipping's trill is strong and steady from first to last note. The Junco's sounds a tad weaker and shorter in duration, as if it didn't inhale quite as deeply as the Chipping before it started to trill. No great matter, though… The presence of these two species in the spring overlaps for only a few weeks before the last of the Juncos have vacated the area until fall.

The song of the **American Tree Sparrow** is more complex, and also somewhat variable between individuals. I've listened to recordings and read descriptions of its melody in field guides but have not come across any easy-to-remember word handle. Still, despite the variability, I attempted to create my own. After dozens of listens here is what I came up with: *Sweety-sweet, bird-birdy-birdy, see-see, dew.* The first two notes are relatively short, shrill and thin compared to the rest that follow. The last note descends.

Fox Sparrow. *Photo by Greg Smith.*

Around mid-March I listen in the yard for the song of a transient **Fox Sparrow**. An individual may descend onto our property to spend just a day to refuel on its journey to breeding grounds that are still over a thousand miles north. Like the testosterone-fueled Juncos and Tree Sparrows, the male Fox Sparrow can't refrain from bursting into occasional song, too. Other sparrows seem content to sing from perches less than twenty feet off the ground, but the Fox seeks the top branchlets of the tallest trees in the yard.

The notes of its song are remarkably rich in tone compared to other sparrow vocalizations. The *Peterson Guide to Birds of Eastern North America* describes the quality as '*brilliant and musical; a varied arrangement of short clear notes and sliding whistles'* (When searching for this on *Merlin*, be sure to scroll through 'additional sounds' to find the song variant titled *(Red)*. This Eastern race migrates through Michigan, and the song is more indicative of what you'll hear here than the western-origin races also featured on the app.).

The contact call of the permanent-resident **Red-bellied Woodpecker**, heard year-round, sounds to me like a short, sharp quack that some field guides call *cha* or *chig*. As winter progresses into spring, you are likely to hear males stringing a bunch together to form a chain of a dozen or more rapid-fire quacks. Another commonly-given territorial call is a rolling *kwirrr* delivered singly or several times in succession.

Over most of Lower Michigan, the once rare, crow-sized **Pileated Woodpecker** has become quite common. Its varied repertoire of vocalizations can easily be learned and recognized in the field, as can its particularly heavy, echoing drum rolls. Since the species is non-migratory, once a pair takes up residence in an area with an abundance of mature trees they're there to stay as long as the habitat is not disturbed. The most common territorial call is a string of rapid *wicks* that are relatively high-pitched for the size of the bird. It appears to run out of gas after fifteen or twenty of them… a significant nuance to note in relation to the next woodpecker.

An overwintering Northern Flicker.

Carol proclaims the large, ornately-colored and patterned **Northern Flicker** as her favorite woodpecker. I believe I might 'second' that. Historically a migratory woodpecker, in recent decades it is not unusual for a handful of individuals to tough-out the winter months in Lower Michigan. Thus, it is not that uncommon to see one at your suet feeder in January. The migratory lot come pouring back into the state throughout March. When a pair arrives, in keeping with the other returning migrants, the male begins regularly and loudly vocalizing to deliver its intent to other Flickers probably more than a half mile distant. Like the Pileated, it too emits a string of rapid *wicks,* but the duration of the series extends two, three or four times longer than that of a typical Pileated. Some males may *wick*-on for close to ten seconds at a time – a very long territorial vocalization for any bird, woodpecker or not!

Eastern Phoebe. *Photo by Greg Smith.*

Playing on the 'baker's dozen' protocol the **Eastern Phoebe** lands the lucky-thirteenth honor of my 'birder's dozen'. This is the only Eastern flycatcher species that can be found overwintering as far north as the Gulf Coast states. All other Eastern flycatchers migrate to central Mexico or further. It is also the first to return to Michigan. These individuals turn up by mid-March – a seemingly risky undertaking for a bird that feeds almost exclusively on airborne insects. It has a special affinity to open woods near water and also has a propensity to build its moss nest under eaves, on pavilion rafters or other man-made structures with shelter over the potential nesting site. Trees

are most always in close proximity. The Phoebe is, in fact, named for its breeding call - an emphatic, raspy, rising *fee-BEE!*

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In addition to the early birds mentioned in the February 2021 column, the thirteen species discussed here hardly make up the complete array of potential avian sound-producers to be heard on a rural March morning. To wit, here are a dozen more, the vocalizations of which you may wish to review through *Merlin* if you are not familiar with them already: House Sparrow, European Starling, American Crow, Blue Jay, Downy Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker, Canada Goose, Mallard, Wood Duck, Killdeer, Common Grackle, and Barred Owl. Before month's end, I so look forward to their return and signature vocalizations I just couldn't bear to leave unmentioned my anticipation of the first Eastern Towhee and Brown Thrasher near the end of the month; fodder, perhaps, for next spring's installment…

Feeling overwhelmed yet? No worries! Your *Merlin* app will keep you on course. Step out your back door, open the app, press the green microphone button and watch the species' names pop up the instant the birds vocalize around you.

Here's another more instructive and exercise-inducing option: Join me on a scheduled morning walk around the country block with 'birding by ear' as the primary focus; or make your own personal appointment with us. Details below...

-Jim McGrath

'Birding by Ear' Guided Country Walk

Saturday, March 21 or Sunday, March 22

7:00-9:00am

Red-winged Blackbird. Photo by Greg Smith.

Exercise your body and your auditory birding skills in this 3.4-mile leisurely walk around the 'country block' in a rural environment north of Williamston.
Starting at Nature Discovery, Jim will lead an intimately-sized group identifying birds by sight and by sound all along the way. Participants will receive a Michigan Birds checklist to keep track of species encountered. Upon the walk's conclusion, we'll gather in the nature center and review our experience over coffee/tea and bagels.

Maximum enrollment per day, 3 participants. Meet at Nature Discovery.
Minimum requested donation: $20/participant. Advance registration required.
Just call 517-655-5349 or email naturedisc87@gmail.com to reserve your spot.

If you'd like to participate but can't make these dates, or if you'd like to make a special appointment for a 'birding by ear' walk either here or at a location of your choosing, contact us.

Nature Discovery

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517.655.5349 *naturedisc87@gmail.com* *www.naturediscovery.net*

Visit Our Nature Center by Appointment

Suggested Minimum Donation: $5/person/hr

The sky's the limit for natural science learning here – with a Michigan twist! Adults, couples and individual families are welcome to schedule an intimate indoor or 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, in-person, hands-on experiences here are unrivaled at any other nature center or zoo! We will bring snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders out of tanks to interact with adults or students of any age or grade-level.

Once the ice melts from our vernal ponds frog activity is not far behind.

Identify and feed "the grand slam of Michigan turtles" - all ten species native to our state! Meet, pet and feed "Milberta", our always hungry Red-footed tortoise.

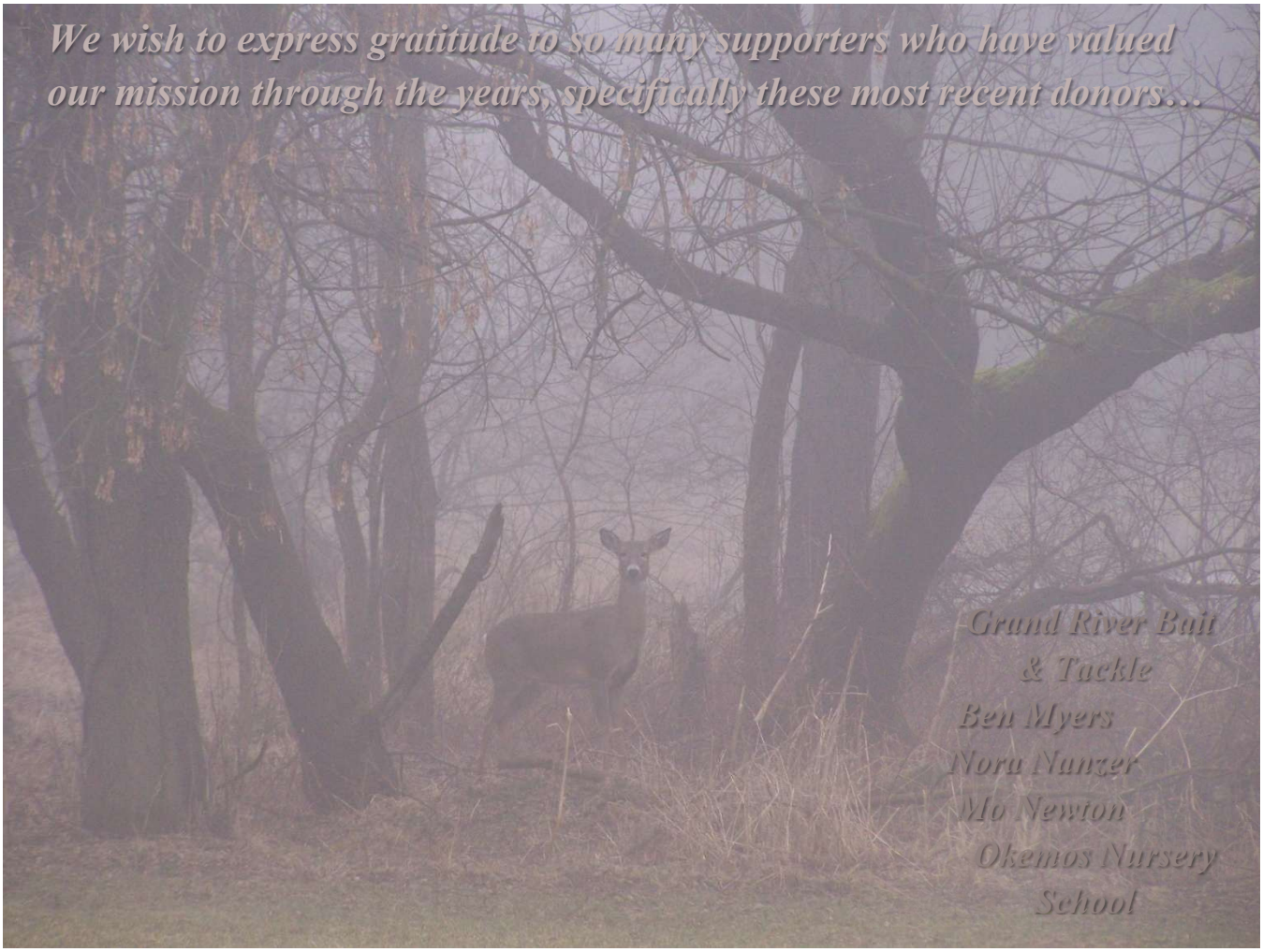
Handle any or all of Michigan's three species of garter snakes while learning how to tell them apart, then watch them gobble up worms. Hold or "wear" a gentle 6-foot Black Ratsnake – the largest in the state!

Many more snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders to identify and feed. Identify birds at the feeders. Take a guided walk on our trails to identify spring birds by their songs. Explore the perimeters our awakening vernal ponds soon to be hopping with frogs.

Make an appointment for your family or small group over SPRING BREAK.
Contact us for additional information or to make an appointment almost any day.

Around the State in March

- ***Thursday, March 5**: 4-5:30pm. MI Snakes Exhibit; North Elementary School Science Night, Lansing.*
- ***Monday, March 9**: 6-8pm. MI Snakes Exhibit; Glencairn Elementary School Science Night, East Lansing.*
- ***Thursday, March 12**: 6-7:45pm. MI Snakes Exhibit; Murphy Elementary School Science Night, Haslett.*
- ***Monday, March 23**: 4-6pm. MI Snakes Exhibit; Cheboygan Public Library, Cheboygan.*
- ***Tuesday, March 24**: 4-6pm. MI Snakes Exhibit; Pellston Branch Library, Pellston.*
- ***Saturday, March 28**: 10am-3pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit, Michigan Bluebird Festival; Washtenaw Community College, Ypsilanti.*



Cedar Creek Vet Clinic: Official Veterinarian of Nature Discovery!

We are grateful to the professionals at CCV for their long-time support of Nature Discovery. The clinic provides health services when needed for the gamut of 'working' Michigan native reptiles and amphibians that reside in the nature center.

Did you know that CCV, located south of Williamston, is acclaimed across the state and beyond for their specialty health care services for birds and reptiles? Check them out, and tell them you saw it here! https://www.cedarcreekvet.com/

Dr. Nolan cradles an ND ratsnake patient.

Nature Record Killed by 'The Fraud' is Released Anyway

"Conservation, restoration and renewed connections between people and nature can improve ecosystem health and strengthen community resilience." – *Phillip Levin, 'Nature Record' Director*
https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/05/climate/trump-nature-assessment.html?campaign_id=54&emc=edit_clim_20260308&instance_id=172174&nl=climate-forward&regi_id=97652655&segment_id=216345&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e

A cabal of criminality cloaked in false patriotism has hijacked our country, eroded stability, and upended the entire world order. Today, it is an understatement to say that each of our futures and our children's futures are far less certain than they were in 2024. Resist, speak up, denounce this betrayal of the people and the constitution we live by.

Heather Cox Richardson succinctly covered many of the sordid bases in her March 7 installment of *Letters from an American*. Please read, share, subscribe:
https://open.substack.com/pub/heathercoxrichardson/p/march-7-2026?utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email

-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***

Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you. ***– Frank Lloyd Wright***

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