

## THIS ISSUE

*Visit Our Nature Center by Appointment*

*LCC Summer Youth Camps*

*Around the State in May*

*Thank you, Donors*

*More Reading for Concerned Americans*

# Mainstreamed Michigan Wildlife Education



*Field guides were instrumental to a young naturalist's growth in the seventies.*

The early seventies.

As a Chicago-area naturalist tween then teen, I was totally engrossed in the wild world around me. Along with my equally avid cohort and incidental namesake, Jim (widely known in the 'hood as 'Goose'), these were quality years of exploration and discovery that, if I could, I would wish *every* youth to experience.

Goose and I scoured field guides to help us identify not just what we were seeing and finding, but so much more that we had yet to experience. We were very competitive in our accumulation of this knowledge. We engaged in field guide 'face-offs' for fun, and even kept score. Facing each other on opposite sides of the table, each of us with a copy of the same field guide in hand, we'd take turns leafing through the pages, finding the image of a certain species, carefully covering the surrounding copy with a hand or a piece of paper, then turning the illustration toward the opponent for identification. I remember lying in bed some nights, lamp lit, paging back and forth through a bird, insect, reptile, or mammal guide, cramming for the 'big game' planned for the following day.

The guides illustrated the tremendous diversity of life that was all around us, and we wanted to experience as much of it in the flesh as we could. In the middle of a sprawling city you'd assume this to be a tall undertaking. Not so. We still managed to find an amazing array of small wild things simply walking up and down residential streets and alleys with senses alert.

On a summer morning we paid twenty cents to ride the Addison Street bus and took it to the end of the line. Of course, on a week day it was crowded with commuters, but by the time we arrived at the turnaround the rest of the seats were empty. We disembarked at the outer edge of the city: woods, fields, ponds, marshes and an array of associated wild things - never seen in our inner city neighborhood - within walking distance from the bus terminus.

A sense of excitement and pride surged when one of us spotted a certain bird, butterfly or other wild creature for the first time in all its three-dimensional splendor. Its common name was shouted like *eureka!* - a recurring affirmation to cumulative hours spent with noses in field guides.

We lived only a couple of short blocks from one another, but I attended a Catholic school, and Goose the nearby public school. We found it both interesting and puzzling that in all our years at each school nothing of what we were taught in our day-to-day formal lessons in the classroom included the natural subjects we were so interested in. It was obvious that to the adults who were dictating the educational curriculum, this tremendous natural diversity that we knew to exist around us was of such little importance it wasn't worth the time to teach, much less, the students to know.

Other adults - parents, relatives, neighbors - appeared to express little interest in this matter either. Iterations of our experiences were often met with attitudes of condescension or dismissal. To them, the myriad living subjects of our interest were no more than children's sources of diversion - like toys.

I still remember a brief encounter with my father when I was a high school sophomore. I had risen early on a Saturday morning in January and was bundling up to leave the house. My sibs and mom were still in bed but my dad was in the kitchen. He asked where I was going. I told him that Goose and I were going out to look for cocoons (of two giant silk moths in particular - the Polyphemus and Cecropia). He looked after me as I headed toward the door then asked, "When are you going to outgrow that?" I think I shrugged and muttered, "I don't know," as I opened the door and walked out. The exchange sparked a twist in my introspection. I couldn't begin to imagine that some day my inevitable maturation should dictate that I abandon my preoccupation with the varied and infinitely interesting living world that surrounded me.

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Looking back, this precious span of spontaneous, nearly-daily natural exploration - which seemed at the time so limitless - lasted a mere five years or so before the responsibilities and distractions inherent in modern young-adulthood (i.e., girlfriends, parties, cars, jobs, college) demanded increasing swaths of our time. Our excursions, greatly curtailed, had to be 'scheduled.'

Not to say that those carefree days of a couple of early-teen naturalists were entirely so. Aside from our gains in natural knowledge another dark revelation began to grow and fester - our awareness of habitat destruction.

The term, *urban sprawl*, entered conversation in the media. Urbanites with the means were moving out of cities in droves to build dream homes in suburbia. The associated infrastructure laid to accommodate them led to further habitat destruction; and, of course, inevitably in the richest country on the planet, there followed copious commercial venues to ostensibly make all other consumerist dreams come true.

This was beyond just news to us. It was personal. Year to year we witnessed the destruction of habitats within which, perhaps just the summer before, we had found Indigo Buntings, Great Spangled Fritillaries, Western Chorus Frogs, DeKay's Snakes and Short-tailed Shrews. The very meadows and marshes we had roamed were bulldozed, scraped down to an amalgam of rutted mud and pushed up piles of mangled brush. Entire woodlands were clearcut, on the way to being replaced by strip malls, gas stations and subdivisions of clean, new houses - sterile of the diverse life that so recently had occupied the space.



*The Northern Brownsnake used to be known as the DeKay's Snake.*

In 'Acknowledge the Chorus Frog' (<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Apr19.pdf>) I

provide details of the destruction of one particular habitat, then of how my outrage over it spurred a resolve to dedicate my life to doing something about it:

*Can there be an “environmental” loss of innocence? If so, for me this was it. Up until then, beginning in my backyard and neighborhood as a little kid I searched for and discovered myriad wild life forms strictly to feed my personal, eager curiosity - marveling at life’s diversity of form, function and, each in its own way, beauty. Now I had experienced not just a personal loss but witnessed a novel environmental injustice, a profound violation, a local, community-sanctioned execution that I felt powerless to stop.*



*Western Chorus Frog.*

*Thus began a new, more serious impetus to my study and understanding of nature: getting others to know. I reasoned that it would be hard to care about something if you never knew about it and easy to destroy something if you never learned about it. On the other hand, those who knew would be more likely to care. Those who cared would be more conscientious about how their activities on the landscape affect the quality of wild life that resides there. People who knew and cared would also become more adamant about doing whatever it takes to keep the land, water, air and atmosphere healthy for quality of all life on Earth - human and otherwise. It was the formulation of a reason and a will to live life sustainably.*

I hadn’t the perspective to realize it then, but I had conceived a simple and direct conservation education objective, the crux of which continues to be the common take-away from all of Nature Discovery’s educational functions. Today, Carol and I continue to remain true to the budding convictions of that enthusiastic, concerned kid-naturalist from the early seventies.

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Fast-forward fifty years...

As of next month Nature Discovery has been in operation for the past thirty-eight. In our unique capacity over this span and through a range of educational techniques, topics and venues we have directly interacted with hundreds of thousands of Michigan-resident children and adults. This underlying message is common to all of them: There is inherent, lasting value for us in acknowledging and protecting wildlife, habitats, and, ultimately, the health of the environment, in general.

Yet, as we’ve worked through all these years, the writing has always been evident on the wall. Despite our life’s dedication to ‘the cause,’ our impact is too small in scale to match an ever-metastasizing anthropocentric myopia that infects our society. The outlook is bleak on so many fronts.

Natural habitats continue to be gobbled up and destroyed and the environment degraded by legions with short-sighted, self-gratifying or profit-driven goals. Natural diversity and natural abundance are declining at an accelerating pace. Atmospheric carbon rises, the devastating consequences of which are now only beginning to be felt, but not badly enough for us to take responsibility for curtailing our personal carbon footprints. Microplastics can be detected in every location on the planet including within the tissues of animal life, including yours and mine, yet, we won’t stop buying, using and discarding it. Our non-biodegradable garbage is turning the acidifying oceans to cesspools (The Pacific Garbage Patch alone is estimated to encompass over six hundred thousand square miles, over twice the size of Texas.). And most recently, the American voters have chosen for a second time an egotist who fancies himself our king and who concerned scientists rightly peg as the most environmentally-destructive president, by a ‘landslide,’ to ever hold the position.



If we don't right the ship our children and grandchildren would be justified in never forgiving us.



*A Bluebird pair is currently feeding nestlings in our 'clothesline pole' box.*

Despite the gloom in these accounts should we just give up and throw in the towel? (I'm screaming in print here...) *No!* There is plenty of biodiversity still here and worth saving. Just stop, look around, listen!

\* Last Saturday I led a small group on a local birding excursion. We tallied a whopping seventy-seven species in less than five hours afield.

\* Seated on our patio now, I watch a pair of Eastern Bluebirds that are nesting in a box on our clothesline pole. They go about tirelessly gleaning insects from the chemically-untainted, botanically-diverse lawn in front of me, then deliver them to their hungry nestlings inside the box.

\* A male Scarlet Tanager glows in the sunlight as it sings its signature, burry breeding song from the topmost limb of a large Wild Black Cherry. I raise my binoculars to also view its silent mate, wearing muted colors, busily gleaning tiny caterpillars from the fresh, new, leafy growth in a nearby Boxelder.

\* At dusk on this warm, humid May day, the nocturnal Eastern Gray Tree Frogs will become active and deafeningly vocal on the vernal ponds behind the yard. I'll walk a path through the trees to record this cacophony of life perpetuating itself. Then, flashlight off and eyes adjusted to the darkness, I'll amble slowly back to the yard, eyes scanning the ground in front of and around me. I'll spot the scattered, dim pinpoints of light on the woodland floor - larvae now, that in another month will flash more brightly in the airspace over our lawn as adult fireflies.

\* I could go on... I could also go on in detail regarding specific wildlife species in our neighborhood and on our own property, the populations of which have undergone steep nosedives in recent years.

The natural world is remarkably resilient. Given a chance, most species almost always bounce back; that is, if we as humans, as countries, as corporations, as communities, as individuals, will ease up on the incessant clobbering. Start by consciously working to educate yourself and your children, then do the right thing in order to coexist with what's still here. (Specific phone apps available today are less cumbersome and far more efficient than bound field guides. You can identify what you're seeing or hearing nearly instantaneously, then learn more details about your discovery at your leisure.) You will surely find your own life enriched immeasurably in the process.



*This Eastern Gray Tree Frog will wait 'til sunset to join others for a mid-May soiree in the vernal pond..*

My friend and I were all too aware back then that education in the classroom about such subjects was largely nonexistent. In fifty years, the status quo has hardly budged. How could it when the very administrators who set the curricula never learned it in the classroom when they were young? They may well not fathom that Michigan-specific nature and wildlife education can be so broad, so varied, so ecologically-complex, and so applicable to us. Indeed, a K-12 curriculum featuring regular weekly lessons about specific bugs, birds, frogs, turtles, snakes, mammals, and fish; additionally, wildflowers, trees, vines and invasive plants – would be so brimming with content that thirteen years would *still* not be enough.

This is my educational utopia. In the long run (if we have that much time) its implementation would help to right the many human-generated wrongs that are sickening our planet and destroying our quality of life. Yes, a utopia is, by definition, a place or ideal of unattainable perfection. Ideals of perfection are chased without ever ultimately reaching them due to our own inherent shortcomings. Yet, an effective spur to action requires confidence that conscientious effort focused on a worthy cause is likely to produce some measurable shift of the needle closer to the perceived state of perfection - especially if the movement goes broad-scale, mainstream.

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This is hardly all a ‘pipe dream’ with no concrete basis. Students at Montessori Children’s House in Lansing and Stepping Stones Montessori in East Lansing - where I have taught weekly since the early nineties - receive regular lessons on these topics, and *love* them. Teachers and parents often expound on the children’s resultant interest, awareness, then demonstration of knowledge gained in the classroom when they’re outdoors. An outsized percentage of past students exposed to Nature Discovery lessons have carried on to higher education, as well as careers in various fields in the natural sciences.



*Our Wood Turtle enjoys a strawberry, unfazed by the close attentions of Okemos Nursery School students.*

Ditto, related to weekly lessons for preschoolers at Okemos Nursery School (since 2009). Go Like the Wind Montessori within the Whitmore Lake Public School system, began using Nature Discovery’s lessons for their students on a monthly basis this school year. Conversation is under way to double the number of lessons next school year.

Finally, beginning early in 2024, and throughout this academic year, North School within the Lansing Public School District, has integrated our lessons into their curricula. This has been the most challenging regular teaching job of my career, succinctly-put, due to all the peripheral baggage, behavioral and otherwise, that comes with life in a socio-economically depressed neighborhood.

At the outset, these children, kindergarten through eighth grade, demonstrated a complete lack of knowledge, awareness of, or even interest in some of the most common living creatures found in their neighborhoods. A large percentage reacted with indifference, ambivalence, disgust or even outright fear of various insects, herps or other live creatures I brought in to show and discuss.

What a difference a full school year of regular lessons makes. This week as I entered a fourth grade classroom the students erupted with a spontaneous cheer over the lesson they were about to receive. Each was given a pair of binoculars and one of our Michigan Birds checklists, then we walked around the school grounds identifying birds by sight and by their songs. Students tallied species we encountered on their checklists.

Back in the classroom, I gathered the binoculars and walked down the hall to a fifth grade classroom to lead a similar lesson. I opened the door and entered. Faces looked up in unison, lit up with recognition, then they too cheered.

“Wow, thank you for that welcome!” I said as I walked into the room.

“You’re a celebrity in here,” the teacher replied.

—Jim McGrath



# Nature Discovery

5900 N. Williamston Road Williamston, MI 48895  
517.655.5349 [naturedisc87@gmail.com](mailto:naturedisc87@gmail.com) [www.naturediscovery.net](http://www.naturediscovery.net)



## *Visit Our Nature Center by Appointment*

*Suggested Minimum  
Donation: \$5/person/hr*

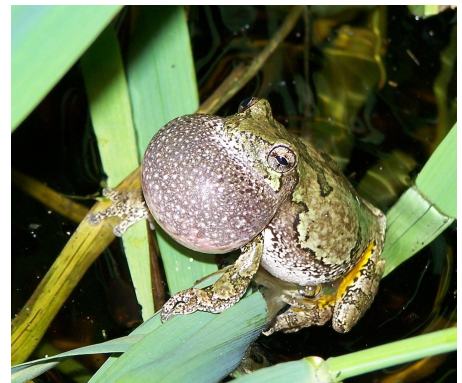
The sky's the limit for natural science learning here – with a Michigan twist! Adults, couples and individual families are welcome to schedule an intimate indoor or outdoor visit to what we call “The Biggest Little Nature Center in Michigan,” and “Home to the Largest Zoo of Michigan-native Reptiles and 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.

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 and frogs. 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.

Make a special evening appointment to check out our ponds, loud with breeding tree frogs, then search for glowworms (firefly larvae) on the trail sides after dark. Contact us for additional information or to schedule a day and time.



*Spotlight Tree Frogs vocalizing on our vernal ponds.*

Ask about special guided birding outings and nature walks at a natural area of your or our choosing!



# ***LCC Summer Youth Camps***

Carol's summer youth camps/classes in 2025 through Lansing Community College at LCC's East Lansing campus are filling fast. Here are remaining offerings...

**June 23-26:** 9am-12pm, WETLAND EXPLORERS, Gr. 6-8.

**July 14-17:** 1-4pm, FOOD & FUN, Gr. 4-5.

Visit <https://www.lcc.edu/seriousfun> for details and enrollment procedures.



## ***Around the State in May***

❖ Sunday, May 18: 10am-2pm. MI Frogs Exhibit; Williamston Farm & Artisan Market, Williamston.

❖ Tuesday, May 20: 6-7:30pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Emerson School, Ann Arbor.

*We wish to express our gratitude the many supporters of our mission over the years, in particular our most recent donors. Thank you!*

*Grand River Bait & Tackle*

*Jan Heminger*

*Lyric Stock*

*Tricia Thompson*

*Gene Wasserman*



## *More Reading for Concerned Americans*

We Study Fascism, and We're Leaving the U.S.

[https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/14/opinion/yale-canada-fascism.html?campaign\\_id=9&emc=edit\\_nn\\_20250514&instance\\_id=154502&nl=the-morning&regi\\_id=97652655&segment\\_id=197914&user\\_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/14/opinion/yale-canada-fascism.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20250514&instance_id=154502&nl=the-morning&regi_id=97652655&segment_id=197914&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e)

What's the Cost to Society of Pollution? [The Fraud] Says Zero

[https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/10/climate/social-cost-carbon-trump.html?campaign\\_id=54&emc=edit\\_clim\\_20250511&instance\\_id=154321&nl=climate-forward&regi\\_id=97652655&segment\\_id=197744&user\\_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/10/climate/social-cost-carbon-trump.html?campaign_id=54&emc=edit_clim_20250511&instance_id=154321&nl=climate-forward&regi_id=97652655&segment_id=197744&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e)

EPA Plans to Shut Down Energy Star Program

[https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/06/climate/epa-energy-star-eliminated.html?campaign\\_id=54&emc=edit\\_clim\\_20250511&instance\\_id=154321&nl=climate-forward&regi\\_id=97652655&segment\\_id=197744&user\\_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/06/climate/epa-energy-star-eliminated.html?campaign_id=54&emc=edit_clim_20250511&instance_id=154321&nl=climate-forward&regi_id=97652655&segment_id=197744&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e)

Collapsing Bird Numbers in North America Prompt Fears of Ecological Crisis – Research

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/01/collapsing-bird-numbers-north-america-study-species>

Study Raises the Possibility of a Country Without Butterflies

[https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2025/study-raises-the-possibility-of-a-country-without-butterflies?utm\\_campaign=fy25\\_alumni&utm\\_source=meta&utm\\_medium=paidsocial&utm\\_content=Alumni\\_Traffic\\_Static\\_CountryWithoutButterfliesB&fbclid=IwY2xjawKB1qRleHRuA2FlbQIxMQBicmlkETFiRHdvMUUp5cXlMRfZJb2ZlAR7Nt142fBPWEgGbh7li7IDBbJmTp4W8QfzxFHtAGgofZOR3ufhGq1lbhng2pw\\_aem\\_AJ2sXOnJpfdmsHTixon1XA](https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2025/study-raises-the-possibility-of-a-country-without-butterflies?utm_campaign=fy25_alumni&utm_source=meta&utm_medium=paidsocial&utm_content=Alumni_Traffic_Static_CountryWithoutButterfliesB&fbclid=IwY2xjawKB1qRleHRuA2FlbQIxMQBicmlkETFiRHdvMUUp5cXlMRfZJb2ZlAR7Nt142fBPWEgGbh7li7IDBbJmTp4W8QfzxFHtAGgofZOR3ufhGq1lbhng2pw_aem_AJ2sXOnJpfdmsHTixon1XA)

I Break for Robins

[https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/05/opinion/spring-wildlife-safety.html?campaign\\_id=9&emc=edit\\_nn\\_20250505&instance\\_id=153899&nl=the-morning&regi\\_id=97652655&segment\\_id=197320&user\\_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/05/opinion/spring-wildlife-safety.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20250505&instance_id=153899&nl=the-morning&regi_id=97652655&segment_id=197320&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e)

–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*





**Union of  
Concerned Scientists**  
Science for a healthy planet and safer world

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**NATURE DISCOVERY** 5900 N. Williamston Road Williamston, MI 48895

(517) 655-5349 [naturedisc87@gmail.com](mailto:naturedisc87@gmail.com) [www.naturediscovery.net](http://www.naturediscovery.net)