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## **Y25ND**

Whoa! Apparently we're too caught up in day-to-day business. This would never fly in a marriage. It took us until September to notice that Nature Discovery is 25 this year. Of course, with milestones come reflections and there are enough of them to make a sizeable, interesting and entertaining book. In fact, most of our current subscribers are not familiar with Nature Discovery's modest conception.

Carol and I grew up in separate neighborhoods on Chicago's northwest side. We met as young adults while working at a printing company in The Loop. Within two years we were married. Our plan was for her to attend the University of Illinois, Chicago, while I worked full time. After she attained her degree, we would move near another college where I could work toward a wildlife biology degree while she worked to pay the bills.

In December of '84, days after Carol's graduation, we packed up and moved to Michigan. We rented an apartment in Holt and I began studies at Michigan State in January.

As an incoming transfer, I was assigned an academic advisor. When he asked if I had a career goal, I explained my idea of starting a Michigan wildlife education business. He responded that, unless I first sought to attain non-profit status and organize a board of directors, there was no chance that I'd get it off the ground. He added that most nature centers, despite funding boosts from grant monies and other subsidies, still had a difficult time staying afloat. He recommended that I readjust my career path.

Deflated and confused about what else to pursue, I plowed through the courses and terms. In my mind no vocation could be more important than education when it came to conservation of wildlife diversity, and, more broadly, the health of the environment. Meanwhile, I became very active in the student Fish & Wildlife Club. Dr. Glenn Dudderar, MSU's wildlife extension specialist, was advisor to the club. Over the next two years, Dr. Dudderar and I got to know each other quite well.

At a club social event, I asked if I could bounce an idea off him that I had for a start-up business. After I explained my vision in some detail, he admitted that over the years he had known several people who had tried wildlife education as an entrepreneurial endeavor. However, in every case, the person had to either supplement it with income from another job, or, more often, for lack of steady income, give it up

to pursue more lucrative employment. Then, to my surprise, he added, “But if anyone could pull it off I think you could.” I hardly missed a beat with my response. “Would you be my advisor?”

The business officially started in June of 1987 only weeks after I graduated. Carol was working full time as an analytical chemist at a company in Howell. I continued to work part time at the Wild Birds Unlimited store in Okemos. I envisioned what I wanted to do, but needed to find a way to get started with little capital, no official place of business, and no clientele.

Dr. Dudderar, arranged for me to use a lab in the basement of the Natural Resources Building that was idle over the summer as a temporary nature center. I acquired aquariums, then caught garter snakes, frogs and turtles to keep. I produced a promotional flyer advertising summer nature-oriented day camps then stuffed faculty and staff mailboxes campus-wide. So as not to be overwhelmed in my first solo educational attempt, I set the maximum number of students at six per week. Working parents on campus jumped at the opportunity and convenience. The small roster filled almost every week.

Over 100 acres of natural area south of the Natural Resources Building was at our disposal. Sandwiched between the building’s parking lot and the railroad tracks to the south we explored a few-acre natural area and a permanent pond. (The Trowbridge Road extension now occupies the spot.) Beyond that and across Service Road my students and I had full access to Baker Woodlot as well as to a huge overgrown field on the west side of Farm Lane. (Now it is mostly occupied by the surplus store and recycling center.)



We scooped an array of small aquatic life from the pond, identified trees and wildflowers, rolled logs in search of salamanders, searched for bird nests and learned their songs, netted insects, then brought them back to the classroom to identify, pin, and mount for personal collections. We caught more insects, worms, fish and frogs to feed to the classroom animals.

On Friday of each week, we walked to the Red Cedar, rented canoes from the livery and paddled with nets and a bucket in search of riverine wildlife. Sometimes we’d catch a turtle. We stopped at the dairy store for ice cream.

The camps were so dynamic that a natural discovery on a certain day could spin the rest of the day onto an unplanned tangent. During one river trip we netted an alien-looking, eyeless, larval lamprey several inches in length that swam, eel-like, beneath the canoe. When we returned to the building, we showed it to one of the fisheries professors in the hall. Through the afternoon, a number of faculty and college students got word that we had a live lamprey larva and came to see it. One fisheries professor gave us an impromptu lesson about its history, its devastating impact on the Great Lakes ecosystem, and its unusual life cycle. When parents arrived at day’s end, the campers turned naturally into teachers, showing the larva in the bucket and gushing with information.

On another occasion we found a number of large, dry, brown, cicada nymph skins stuck to the bark of a tree trunk by their hooked claws. Adults had emerged and flown some time before. The dried skin left behind has the superficial appearance of being a live, scary-looking bug. I showed the students how a skin could be removed from the trunk intact by gently squeezing it to release the grip of the claws. The spurs on the feet would allow it to be reattached on any other textured surface, like a screen, or even the fabric of clothes. Soon, each student was donning a cicada-skin brooch.

That afternoon, when we went to the dairy store for ice cream, we decided to play a practical joke on

unsuspecting customers waiting in line. We arranged the cicada skin on the back collar of each student's t-shirt just below the nape. While the rest of us sat at a table in the corner, each student would individually stand in line to see how strangers would react to the big bug on the verge of crawling on to this apparently unsuspecting child's neck. One adult hurriedly slapped it off. Another genuinely exclaimed, "There's a big bug on your neck!" Others caught on when they saw the kids' stifling laughs, then smiled or laughed along with them.

Parent feedback throughout the summer was gratifying and confidence-building. One morning a mother dropped her daughter off, motioned me to the side and said she needed to let me know what kind of an impact I was having on her daughter, who was never a morning person. She went into her daughter's room to wake her up and found her washed, dressed and just finishing making her bed. She couldn't wait to get to camp. Another had sent her son to Fenner Nature Center for camps earlier in the summer and over previous summers. She said he seemed fine with them until he attended the Nature Discovery camp. He told her he didn't want to do Fenner camps any more. They had suddenly become boring.

Like any matter in a state of inertia, force was needed to get the ball rolling. Years of effort were required to get the business rolling at a sustainable rate. Carol joined Nature Discovery "full-time" in 1999. Since then, the business has blossomed as fully as I had fantasized when I first entered the advising office all those years ago.

Locally, we keep weekly specialist teaching positions at Montessori Children's House in Lansing, Stepping Stones Montessori in East Lansing, Okemos Nursery School, and Fairview Elementary in Lansing.

We're more traveled and well-known throughout the state than we ever imagined. Revenue generated from presentations and exhibits for schools, nature centers, birthday parties, parks and festivals, in addition to summer camps and other regular programs, trips and tours offered out of our home-based facility encompass the bulk of our income. The Michigan DNR recognizes Nature Discovery as a valuable asset to their education and outreach programs and utilizes us regularly.



Our four kids have been surrounded by nature and nature-related communication every day. Not surprisingly, they really know their stuff and are completely comfortable in front of audiences. Our eldest, Glen, presents solo at many venues when Carol and I are unavailable.

I am thankful for the contributions, large and small, of so many people which have made a positive impact on the business over the years. Dr. Glenn Dudderar is now retired and living on the East Coast. Would Nature Discovery exist if he hadn't expressed his confidence in an undergrad's potential? Carol has always recognized my passion and has unwaveringly supported my drive to make this happen in any way necessary. Then, of course, a lifetime of thanks to our four offspring - Glen, Robin, Reed and Lily - now young adults, who had no choice but to compete with, tolerate, and, many times, take a back seat to the demands of this in-home whirlwind. Their mother and I can only hope that the positives outweigh the negatives as they assess of the quality of their childhoods.

Over the next issue or two we'd like to include memories or comments from any past or current students, parents, teachers or other participants in our many programs throughout the years. Please take a few minutes to email us a couple of lines or a short paragraph. Thank you for contributing to this amazing 25-year ride. We're not done by a long shot!

-Jim McGrath





## *Catch Nature Discovery on WLNZ Radio's morning show, Coffee Break*

Jim is scheduled to appear this month on Wednesday, October 10 at 9:45am. The show airs weekdays from 9 to 10am on 89.7 FM. There is a TV simulcast of the show on Comcast stations 15, 21 or 31. 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 also post a Facebook reminder prior to the show.

## *Meet the Grand Slam of Michigan Frogs Sunday, October 14*

*Doors open from 1 to 5pm  
Admission: \$5/person*

Join us for *The Grand Slam of Michigan Frogs*, featuring our complete and unique educational zoo of all 13 species found in the state. Then have some complimentary cake and ice cream to celebrate Nature Discovery's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary!

Our 2pm presentation will feature the complete grand slam. Frogs and toads will be passed in containers among audience members for up-close inspection, then supplemented with Powerpoint images to help participants to confidently tell one from another. Learn which eight species can be found in the greater Lansing area; which two species look so identical they can only be identified by their calls; which is Michigan's rarest frog; which Michigan frog can only be found in the U.P.; what type of pond is most critical for successful frog reproduction; what frog's numbers increase on a wetland when other species decline; what factors are causing us to lose frog diversity; and more.



*An American Toad blends nearly perfectly with brown leaf litter on the forest floor.*



*The Eastern Gray Tree Frog is commonly seen clinging to the siding of rural homes.*

Doors are open from 1 to 5pm. Kids can catch insects with one of our staff members then feed them to frogs and toads. Watch a snake eat a frog. Visit and interact with the rest of our huge zoo of Michigan snakes, turtles, and salamanders. Take a guided walk on the trail. Our staff is always available to help visitors of all ages make the most of their time here.



## Visit Our Exhibit at **CRANEFEST**

On Saturday, October 13, Nature Discovery will be exhibiting our live Michigan snakes, turtles and frogs at Michigan Audubon's 18<sup>th</sup> annual Cranefest at Baker Sanctuary near Bellevue. Hosting thousands of Sandhill Cranes by mid-October, it's the largest and most spectacular annual accumulation of these birds in the state. There is a lot more to do and see at the festival, too. Visit [www.cranefest.org](http://www.cranefest.org) for more details.

## **Fall Birding Muskegon Saturday, October 27**

6am to around 4:30pm. Join a small group of birders on a day trip to Muskegon Wastewater Facility and several stops along the Lake Michigan shoreline. Waterfowl by the thousands highlight the trip. Our goal, as always, is to identify as many species through the day as possible, though binoculars and even closer looks through our spotting scope. Checklists will be provided. Plan on a fast food stop for lunch. Maximum: 5 participants.

**COST:** Only \$55/person, includes transportation. Meet at Nature Discovery or arrange for pick-up en route!



*The Blue-winged Teal is one of well over twenty species of waterfowl expected on the trip.*

*Photo © Steve Sage*



*The state-threatened Sharp-tailed Grouse is nearly automatic south of the Soo.* Photo © Steve Sage.

## **Winter Birding the U.P. Friday, January 18 to Monday, January 21**

Winter birding in the Upper Peninsula is fantastic! See birds here that are rare or impossible to see near home. These include: sharp-tailed grouse, evening and pine grosbeak, common redpoll, northern shrike, gray jay, boreal chickadee, bohemian waxwing, black-backed woodpecker, bald eagle, rough-legged hawk, snowy owl, and even potential for gyrfalcon, great gray owl and northern hawk-owl. We'll spend

the night at a motel in Cedarville, then bird northward to the Soo. Late in the afternoon, we head west to Marquette, and spend the night at a motel in Negaunee that serves an awesome all-you-can-eat, home-cooked breakfast. Then we'll bird along Pishekee Grade, a well-maintained wilderness logging road, throughout the day. We'll overnight again in Negaunee, then bird around Marquette before heading home. Concerned about the cold? Don't be. The majority of the birding is from within or near the warmth of the van. We'll depart around 10am Friday morning and return by early Monday evening.

**COST:** \$375 (\$150 NR deposit), covers all transportation, lodging, "road lunches," and two hearty breakfasts. This trip is limited to only four participants, so contact us soon to reserve your spot.



## *Thank you... to Cedar Creek Veterinary Clinic*

When housing around 100 animals in all to use for wildlife education, it's difficult to keep all of them healthy all the time! For over a year, now, and running, Cedar Creek has generously donated its veterinary services to Nature Discovery whenever it is required. These folks know that it's more than just a donation to us. It's a donation to quality Michigan wildlife and natural science education for the community. Looking for a vet? Check out their website at [www.cedarcreekvet.com](http://www.cedarcreekvet.com) or call 517.655.4906.

## *Climate Change Realist*

If you missed it in recent issues, due to an abysmal (and we're convinced, strategically planned) lack of coverage in the mainstream, corporate-run media, we're making sure we put forth material every month that acknowledges - not ignores - the reality of climate change. To keep quiet about it for fear that we would lose supporters would deny our mission statement. We won't compromise that.

Two weeks ago the *Lansing State Journal* picked up an article composed by the Associated Press outlining ten issues that voters should consider as they ready themselves to hit the polls. The issues were not numerically ranked, but foremost on the list was a given... *Economy*. Nine more issues followed. How far down the list did *Climate Change* appear? It didn't make the cut. Well, then, how about a more broad title under which it might be included, such as *Environment*. Even that didn't make AP's cut.

Nature Discovery employee, Marietta Leatherman, introduced us to *The Sun* ([thesunmagazine.org](http://thesunmagazine.org)) and *Orion* ([orionmagazine.org](http://orionmagazine.org)). These publications promote sustainable living and the concept of feeling content with "enough," instead of living the interminable quest for "more" that is encouraged in our "consume-more"-based economy. No advertisements clutter these pages, and so, no corporate dollars taint their mission. You will, however, find an abundance of inspirational, thought-provoking reading from and about people striving to live responsibly and unselfishly on the planet that sustains us.

Each issue of *The Sun* ends with a page of quotes submitted by readers, entitled *Sunbeams*. To conclude this installment, here's an appropriate one from the January, 2010 issue:

"Environmentalism suddenly struck me as the most obvious philosophy imaginable: Let us not ruin forever where we live and work and breathe and eat. Earth's future inhabitants will no doubt look upon our current environmental practices - maintained despite all manner of evidence that doing so will result in planetary ruin - roughly the way we look upon eighteenth century surgery. And that is if we, and they, are very lucky." -Tom Bissell

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Check out our Youtube channel, *Wild Williamston*, too!

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