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***Habitat Takes a Hit:
Here Today,
Gone (to the Dogs)
Tomorrow***



Praying mantises are apex insect predators within Legg Park's upland old-field habitat.

If you've kept up with our newsletters you've likely come across this observation that impels our mission. A person who is educated to recognize and understand natural diversity values its existence. Valuing it leads to a desire to preserve it. This person also knows that naturally diverse communities are far more ecologically stable and healthy than any manicured landscape. Conversely, a person who has not been educated to recognize this diversity sees the natural world through fogged lenses. This person is incapable of identifying the myriad species that inhabit a natural community, and therefore dismisses their individual identities and attributes by clumping them together as generic trees, birds, bugs or weeds. Such an out-of-focus perspective tends to not generate a sense of value toward the natural community. In fact, the area in question is more likely to be viewed as a mere obstacle to be removed in the desire for personal wants.

In the spring of 2011, long-time, but now, ex-commissioner, Dr. Eckhart Dersch told us about Meridian Township Parks Commission's plan to create a trendy, sprawling dog park within Legg Park, located on a naturally beautiful stretch of Van Atta Road south of Grand River Avenue, in Okemos. If realized, the park would contribute to the destruction of ten acres of open field natural area here. Dr. Dersch is an MSU professor emeritus, qualified in the study of impacts to natural systems due to human usage. Despite the weight that his recommendation should have been given in light of his academic and professional credentials, Dr. Dersch was the lone voice on the commission against the dog park, and for the natural area's continued preservation. In seeking some allies outside the commission he contacted Nature Discovery. We've used this area many times over decades to educate adults and kids, especially through birding and summer insect-collecting activities.

When I went to the township website to find more information I came across a page that was like a pep rally to get residents excited about this project. A button said something like, "Click here if you are for the dog park." I looked around but could find no button to click if you were against it. Were they really

not interested in citizen feedback if it leaned contrary to their goal? I drafted a letter to them citing my credentials as a wildlife biologist and qualified Michigan-specific environmental educator for over 25 years, followed by reasons for my opposition to the project. I even offered to take them on a guided walk through the area to point out specific organisms that thrive here. Their response? No response! Since the parks commission has chosen to not engage in dialog with contrary views, the least we can do is let their constituents know our perspective.

Today, the dog park is much closer to reality. For all the funds, effort, PR and stonewalling of opposition invested by the parks commission over the past few years there may be no stopping the momentum of their pet project this late in the game. Some main ingredients in the recipe to their success are not just their own lack of interest in acknowledging the natural diversity present on the site, but in the lack of natural diversity education among the township citizens who they've been elected to represent. That is, most of the residents are not in a position to question their means, methods and motivation. I've spoken with many more township residents who were unaware of the proposed dog park altogether.



Despite its display of lavender flower heads almost 2 inches in diameter, Michigan-native Field Thistle didn't make the list.

The parks commission contracted the environmental survey firm, Fishbeck, Thompson, Carr and Huber, to evaluate the feasibility of altering the present ten acres of natural area for the project, and, ostensibly, to tell them what they wanted to hear. Perusal of the report and site plan had me scratching my head. Not surprisingly, they found no endangered, threatened or special concern species present in the designated area, and claimed no "unique" species present, but they also reported "low biodiversity." Assuming this firm is not incompetent, I have to question why so many species of flora and fauna I've experienced in the exact location are missing from the report.

They provide short tables of native plant species present that are far from complete. On the other hand much space in the report and site plan is given to discussion of alien, invasive and toxic species present. For instance, alien Canadian Thistle is listed, yet, native Field Thistle goes unacknowledged. Alien and invasive species are a fact of life on most natural landscapes today, however, I've observed far less invasive species here than in many other local natural areas I've visited, including some nature center grounds. The average reader, though, could come to the logical conclusion from the report and site plan that this natural area is begging for the parks commission to swoop in and save it from itself.

A "meander survey" was conducted by FTC&H on May 12, 2010. Evidence of wildlife usage mentions only goldfinches, cardinals, bluebirds, sparrows, a groundhog burrow, and deer tracks and scat. The conclusion? Pay attention to this... "The upland areas of Legg Park are providing limited wildlife habitat value, but are likely being used by deer, rabbits, fox, opossum, skunk and various species of mice, birds, and reptiles. The inspection revealed that much of the upland areas lack cover, nesting and roosting habitat, vegetated corridors and quality food sources. Therefore, the overall impact on wildlife within the area, by converting a portion of the park to a dog park, will be minimal." Not only is this a paltry and vague list of vertebrate life present here, but...

What, no insects? Insect abundance and diversity is the animal backbone of any functioning natural community. Their critical roles as pollinators, as food for a long list of vertebrate species, and as contributors in the decomposition of dead organisms into nutrients that are recycled into the system

should never be ignored. Many more non-insect invertebrates offer the same services. A walk through this natural area on a warm, late summer afternoon scares up a dizzying array of bees, grasshoppers, crickets, butterflies and moths, beetles, plant bugs, dragonflies, and more. Caterpillars of a variety of Lepidoptera munch on specific food plants without which they would be unable to live. Two species of praying mantises hunt for insect prey among the late summer native goldenrods. Who doesn't marvel at mantises?



Among the goldenrods, abundant Red-legged Grasshoppers provide sustenance to a wide range of vertebrate and invertebrate community members.

For years, Williamston high school's ninth grade biology teachers have assigned students to amass insect collections at the beginning of the school year. Students must collect well over one hundred species across a dozen orders, then mount, classify, identify and label them. The teachers direct and lead them to natural areas which they know from experience harbor the greatest abundance and diversity. Legg Park's upland field is among the best. Needless to say, they are mortified over its pending destruction. One retired biology teacher attended a parks commission meeting to voice his desire for them to keep the natural area in its current state. He walked out feeling like he just talked to a wall.

In 1990, far before dog parks were in vogue, a township parks commission comprised of completely different personnel contracted Snell Environmental Group to survey the area. They constructed a report titled "Park Resource Study and Interpretive Program Development for Meridian Riverfront Park," of which Legg Park is a key piece. The report describes old-field communities in this way: "Typically one of the most productive animal communities, it contains not only breeding residents but predators and transients from the bordering habitats as well. The importance of this habitat as a hunting ground cannot be overstated." And later the report advises: "The open fields at Meridian Riverfront [Legg Park upland field] also contain the most diverse insect populations and are major sources of pollen and nectar for domestic bees. The shrubs and surrounding ecotones in this community probably contain the majority of the park's bird nests."

The disagreement between these reports regarding "quality of habitat" couldn't be more polar! Hmmm... Now, about those nesting birds...

A person who is not versed in bird diversity can be excused for calling any of a half dozen gull species encountered on the beach a "seagull." However, when a professional surveying firm merely lists "sparrows" among wildlife encountered in a given natural area, start waving the red flag!

To most people, the lone word, "sparrow" conjures a fuzzy image of some drab, non-descript, uninteresting, and therefore, probably unimportant bird. However, over twenty species of native sparrows can be found in our state throughout the year. All are migratory. Some, like the Grasshopper Sparrow or Savannah Sparrow nest in appropriate, species-specific habitat around this latitude. Others, like the Dark-eyed Junco and American Tree Sparrow migrate here from the north to spend the winter. Still others, like the White-crowned Sparrow and Fox Sparrow pass through during spring and fall since they breed to our north and overwinter to our south.

Then, there is the familiar, non-native House Sparrow, more often shortened to "sparrow" in conversation or less scientific communication. In fact, it is not a sparrow at all, but the English Weaver Finch, a noisy and messy permanent fixture in city and country, alike, since it readily nests within holes and crevices on human structures. This species is considered a noxious pest at the federal level.

So, what species of “sparrows” did the contracted surveyors observe? Again, giving the benefit of the doubt that they are competent at identifying and reporting all species present, how do they justify listing “sparrows?”

In May of 2011, almost one year later to the day, I took my own “meander” of the target area. Among many other species of birds (I saw or heard over thirty species in ninety minutes of exploration.) I encountered two ground-nesting species in full breeding mode here. A few Song Sparrows sang familiar, beautiful, breeding songs in scattered brushy areas. This may be the most common and widespread sparrow in the state. Of special note, though, were at least two Field



Field Sparrow populations are experiencing steep declines due to habitat loss. Photo © Kelly Azar. www.flickr.com/photos/puttefin/5390606106.

Sparrows singing breeding songs in separate areas. The song is a trill that begins slowly, then rapidly increases tempo. Some describe the quality of the sound to that of a ping pong ball bouncing to a stop or a quarter spinning to a stop on a table. Listen to it at this link to the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology: http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/field_sparrow/id.

While not yet endangered, the Field Sparrow is in trouble across its range. Just recently it was added to a watch list of 33 common species of North American birds that are experiencing steep population declines (<http://stateofthebirds.org/>). Why? You guessed it – habitat loss. The Song Sparrow is more of a habitat generalist and can breed in a wider range of conditions than the Field Sparrow. A couple of these may still be able to nest within the overgrown borders of the dog park. On the other hand, the Field Sparrow is known to not tolerate disturbance and disappears from areas with regular human activity. The dog park will almost certainly force the extinction of Legg Park’s breeding pairs of this species.

Given the propensity of developers and realtors to name subdivisions and strip malls after the habitat or wildlife they displaced, let’s vote on a similar name to help the commissioners remember the flipside to their legacy. Our vote is *Welcome to “Field Sparrow Dog Park!”*

Assuming the dog park is a foregone conclusion, it’s time to move into “educational-moment” mode. Many natural areas that fall to development exist on private land that is purchased by realtors or developers.



A Montessori student holds a freshly-captured Green Lacewing. Just one of these tiny predators can eat thousands of aphids in its lifetime.

The destruction is less available to public scrutiny. With access to township park land, citizens – especially children - have an opportunity to experience a functioning natural community with the knowledge that it will soon be gone for the rest of their lifetimes. The experience far exceeds the impact of simply reading that a given animal is disappearing due to habitat loss. Years from now, these same children, now grown, will look over the area occupied by the dog park and be able to say, “I remember when....” Most importantly, the personal experience increases the chances that they will show due respect into their adult lives toward what remains of natural communities, and exercise more discretion when considering any habitat’s destruction for a human-centric purpose.

We're working to get school classrooms involved. Currently, 4th to 6th grade students at Stepping Stones Montessori in East Lansing have been visiting the area, photographing existing plants and insects, noting other wildlife present, and organizing it to present to the parks commission as a more detailed supplement to the surveyor's report.

We're inviting interested community members to join us at the park on Sunday, October 5 at 4pm. High school biology teachers and their students are encouraged to join us, share details of their explorations, and even lead kids and adults on insect forays through the natural growth.

Read more about next Sunday on the next page!

-Jim McGrath



Catch Nature Discovery on WLNZ Radio's Coffee Break on Monday, September 29

Jim is scheduled to appear on Monday, September 29 at 9:15am, discussing the wildlife of Legg Park's upland field habitat. 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.

Around the State in October

- ❖ *Saturday, October 11: 1 to 6pm. Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Cranefest, Baker Sanctuary, Bellevue.*
- ❖ *Saturday, October 25: 11am to 3pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Spooky Science Saturday, Kingman Museum, Battle Creek.*

Enroll your 2nd-3rd Grader in Creepy Crawlies – Fall Edition Saturdays, Oct 25-Nov 22 at LCC East

Carol is teaching this LIVELY 5-week class featuring hands-on and up close experiences, inside and outside, with a variety of insects, reptiles, amphibians, birds, mammals, and more. It runs from 1 to 4pm for 5 Saturdays at Lansing Community College (East Campus). Call LCC at 483-1860 to enroll.



A Powerpoint Guide to the Upland Field Habitat of Legg Park

*Sunday, October 5
Doors open from
1 to 4pm; \$5/person*



In September, flowering native goldenrods dominate an upland field habitat that's booming with life at Legg Park.

Legg Park is located on Van Atta Road in Okemos about a mile south of Grand River Avenue. Among other natural gems, like its old-growth floodplain forest habitat, the park harbors about fifteen acres of upland old-field habitat that stretches from the park entrance to the pavilion, parking lot and forest trailhead. Meridian Township Parks Commission has slated most of this upland natural area for destruction to make room for its own trendy dog park.



The impressive Giant Swallowtail lays eggs on hop-tree and prickly-ash in the upland field.

At 4pm, whether you've attended the presentation or not, here's an opportunity to experience and appreciate wildlife habitat before it disappears. Any interested adults or families are welcome to join us for a relaxed, but informative hour meandering through Legg Park's upland field and studying its early autumn wildlife while it still exists.

Williamston High School biology students who are currently studying insect diversity will be on hand to help visitors catch and identify insects.

Hardly just "a bunch of weeds," the natural area teems with abundant and diverse ecologically-woven plants, insects, birds and other wild things, most of which are on the verge of being lost. On Sunday, October 5, at 2pm, join us for the original presentation, *A Powerpoint Guide to the Upland Field Habitat of Legg Park*. Discussion of many examples of this diversity and ecology are supplemented with beautiful images of myriad wild things noted here.

Come early or linger afterward to visit, and interact with our huge zoo of Michigan reptiles & amphibians!



The Red-bellied, our state's smallest snake, crosses the entry drive next to the upland field.

Do the Right Thing: “Burn Noticed”

A long-time Nature Discovery follower sent us this link to The Daily Show with Jon Stewart that aired earlier this week on the heels of the climate march in New York.

http://thedailyshow.cc.com/videos/8q3nmm/burn-notice?xrs=synd_facebook_092314_tds_60

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