



THIS ISSUE

Around the State in October

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Reading for the Environmentally-concerned

To David Dempsey, One 'Answer to Despair'

Defender of our Great Lakes, David Dempsey.

It was only a few years after graduating from MSU and launching my professional life in nature/wildlife education that I first met David Dempsey. A tireless defender of the environment throughout his adult life, Dempsey has been on the staff of organizations like Michigan Environmental Council and Clean Water Action that, among other things, help steer policymakers toward sustainable goals for a healthy environment and the citizens who rely on it. He has also authored nine books on related subjects.

Currently, Dempsey is Senior Policy Advisor for Flow Water Advocates (flowwateradvocates.org), a Great Lakes law and policy center based in Traverse City: "Our mission is to ensure the waters of the Great Lakes Basin are healthy, public, and protected for all. We work through the courts, and help communities, businesses, agencies, and legislators make informed policy decisions and protect public trust rights to water."

With a resume like this, I was rightfully honored that Dave would reach out to me as an interview subject on his Substack platform. I gather that in his line of work setbacks of all degrees are common - and, in our current political climate, more daunting and disheartening than ever. Perhaps he felt that an interview with an educator whose dedication strives toward the same end as his own would offer diversion or relief from his own professional battles.

Here is an abridged/edited version of our Q&A session:

Jim McGrath's Answer to Despair: Fully Feeling a Sense of Wonder in the Natural World

Wide eyes and enthusiasm blended with exquisitely articulated science – that's what I vividly remember thirty years later from one of my first outdoor experiences with naturalist Jim McGrath.

It was one of those thrilling spring nights in late March or early April, when the scent and vision of the earth's reawakening and summer's abundance stir the imagination. But I think Jim's is always stirred.

Already a well-regarded naturalist and environmental educator, he was leading a mixed group of adults and kids on an evening walk to a vernal pond in Rose Lake Wildlife Area, near East Lansing. Vernal ponds are small, ephemeral wetlands covered by shallow water in spring. They are often dry for most of the summer and fall.

But in the spring, they are subtly, astoundingly alive. Jim scooped up a jar of water and held it to the beam of his flashlight in the darkening evening. All of us, adults, and kids alike, exclaimed at the startling abundance of life in that jar – a multitude of organisms, some barely visible, the largest no bigger than a pencil stub. Jim was probably seeing this for the thousandth time, but he was as thrilled as we were.

And if I can remember that experience from so long ago, I'm confident a thirty-something adult out there remembers it too.

That's how Jim teaches – through demonstration, storytelling, knowledge, and a contagious wonder. Needing a shot of hope, I recently decided to interview him. It was good medicine for me.

Jim and his wife Carol are co-proprietors of Nature Discovery, a small business with a big impact. Working weeks that can roll up to seventy or more hours, they move to schools and conferences across the state with displays of small animals like snakes. They also host people curious about nature in their own 6.3-acre preserve near Williamston.

We did the math together – and it's quite possible that in his nearly four decades as a nature educator, he has reached hundreds of thousands of people with lessons that stick with them forever. Heck, it might be over a million.



Us in 2021.

Here's what we talked about.

How do you handle the long hours?

If I didn't feel like this is what I was put on Earth to be doing, I think I'd burn out. I've told Carol that it seems as if a force beyond my control is driving me; an inner voice telling me 'You have to do this.' I can't find an 'off' button. Ultimately, I think, it's this mission to spark an attitude in people to care about the health of the environment and the fate of all this precious, endlessly fascinating life that relies on it.

A huge chunk of our long hours involves continuous maintenance of the zoo of creatures we keep on hand here, so they're always available to excite and educate others through the course of a given week. We often tell people that every minute of every day there is a mouth to be fed or poop to be cleaned here. If we're home, this is often what you'll find us doing.

Where did your love of nature come from?

It feels innate. As early as I can remember - surely before school-age – I harbored a fascination with living things beyond the human ones around me. I can't pinpoint any specific influence from older people in my life.

As a tyke I was easily preoccupied with looking for and closely inspecting living things accessible to me. Naturally, then, it started with the small crawling things in my Chicago backyard. I gained knowledge about the wild living world before actually physically experiencing much of it. Field guides were my favorite books. My nose was in them every day. As I grew older, increasing mobility and autonomy allowed my sphere of experience with natural diversity to expand.

How do you get kids interested?

In a nutshell, I simply show wild, living, locally-occurring creatures to them. And there is a dizzying wealth of it all around us if we have the awareness and take the time to look. I proceed to make them privy to the niche a particular creature occupies in the ecosystem, where and how to find it, and how to identify it. I'll highlight a fascinating aspect or two in the way it lives its life - perhaps a strange, funny, or otherwise interesting behavioral trait - and its association with other elements of its ecology, like its prey, or the predators that pursue it. I'll also point out certain critical elements found in its habitat that it absolutely cannot survive without. This is its real-life story.

I can see by their faces that they are, indeed, interested. By just introducing them to this fascinating creature and then sharing details of its unique life and special niche, I give them a reason to care about it. Often, I'll further explain how people who never learned about it often unknowingly do something or other in the environment that negatively impacts the given creature's ability to find food, to successfully nest, or for its young to survive. They're visibly concerned.

Wildlife is not just something out in the country, is it?

No. A lot can be found not far outside of anyone's door if you know how, where, and when to look for it. I like bringing these things in and say, 'Check this out. This lives around your neighborhood.'

In an urbanized setting amphibian and reptile populations are likely absent due to insufficient habitat, but a fair amount of bird and insect diversity can still be found. Even in these settings, close to your home, a park, a vacant lot, or another area with naturally-occurring growth can be available for exploration and discovery. Gravitate to green islands in the city where you see trees, shrubs and unmown grass and you'll surely find more wild animal life - bugs to birds and beyond, each species fascinating in its own right.

And then I show them something about its behavior, what it eats maybe. Feeding one of our snakes, frogs, or turtles in front of an audience is always a hit. Feeding time at the zoo is so popular. You know, feeding time for the penguins is listed at two o'clock and a crowd builds to watch.

Does this work for adults?

Absolutely. And the basic messages are the same as what I deliver to young audiences. I merely repackage it for a mature one. Members of a typical adult audience have largely completed their formal schooling.



Kids at a recent event in East Lansing join Jim to watch our Northern Watersnake 'dunk for minnows.'

Unfortunately, education that emphasizes place-based natural diversity was missing through their own formal K through twelve schooling. So the same species and ecological connections that I introduce to youth are generally new to them as well, and they're just as fascinated.

What level of knowledge or awareness do you find in the adult population?

At the start of a presentation on some Michigan natural science topic - perhaps at a library, or a club or organizational meeting - I get the audience in a suitable frame of mind by stating that we're losing natural diversity and abundance all around us at an alarming rate. Yet so few people seem aware of it as they go about their lives.

I'll challenge them that if you can't tell one bird from another, one butterfly from another, one frog, turtle, squirrel, wildflower, or tree from another, you are in no position to notice if we are losing it. I'll then unabashedly tell them, "I can, and I'm saying to you from a lifetime of observations, we're definitely losing it, and I can give you a long list of examples right around your own neighborhood."

The majority of society walks among the naturally diverse environment viewing it through fogged lenses. They may be able to recognize something as a tree, a bird, or a butterfly but they never learned to look closely enough to differentiate it all, and maybe, were never given a reason to try.

At these presentations, a supporting introductory PowerPoint page on the screen shows a collage of six images – photos I've taken of wild things around our country acreage. I state that a very small percentage of Michigan resident adults would be capable of correctly identifying the organism in all six frames. Some audience members will name one, two or three accurately, but over a couple of decades showing and discussing it I can't recall a single person reciting the names of all six.

By the way, if you're now curious what they are - I have a few versions featuring different species – but one collage of six features a Polyphemus Moth, a Northern Flicker, a mature Spicebush Swallowtail larva, a pair of mating Eastern Gray Tree Frogs, a Pearl Crescent butterfly perched on a Black-eyed Susan petal, and a coiled Northern Ribbon Snake.



Spicebush Swallowtail larva.

Everybody asks these days, how do you get young people to take an interest in nature?

I don't think you can just say to kids, go outside. They need to want to go outside. I think what we offer gives them lots of reasons to want to get out there. In a presentation I'm saying, "Look at these cool bugs. They're living in your yard, your neighborhood or somewhere close by. See for yourself." If a child never learns about these things, the incentive to go out and find them may never be realized, possibly for their entire lives.

In many cases I only have a short time – maybe an hour presentation - to make the impression, using live props that I brought along. But parents often share with me that after such exposure they've noticed a change in the way their child pays attention to the wild world around them when they happen to be outside. They may notice, point out and take active interest in a singing bird, a butterfly that goes by, or the garter snake in their yard that used to stir ambivalence.

Just last week I gave a presentation to a third grade classroom about butterfly and moth caterpillars, many of which can be found crawling around in late summer and early fall. I showed them larvae of about six different species that I had picked up. The next day the teacher emailed me to report that the presentation induced many of the kids to spend their recess in the schoolyard looking for caterpillars.

Do these experiences stick with kids later in life?

One kid got turned on to insects from doing insect day camps here at Nature Discovery. I recently got word that he just defended his master's thesis in entomology. I look at what got me excited as a kid and I try to give that to the kids that I'm in front of.

This is not mainstream education and it needs to be. Of what I teach, ninety-five percent, I'd say, is not content in a public school curriculum from kindergarten through twelfth grade.

I think public education's attitude towards natural sciences right now does not inspire much of a sense of wonder towards the natural world in kids.

Can we change that?

I think so. When I was a kid it struck me that the things I was most interested in were not taught at school. I had to pursue it on my own. At no grade level could a student learn about all the varied species of butterflies or birds or snakes or frogs and so on that lived around them.

By mere omission, it seems the crafters of school curricula are sending an unspoken message: that learning about natural diversity around your neighborhood or around your state is not important. I can't help but wonder whether those that determine and set a school curriculum - since they never learned about it in their own public schooling - can't fathom how much there is to teach and learn about place-based natural diversity.

As a result, kids who had few opportunities if any to learn about natural diversity on their own grow into adults who can't tell one bird from another, one tree from another, one butterfly, frog, or snake from another. If they never acknowledged the existence of a particular species when it was alive and among us, then it went extinct, would they miss it when it's gone? I tell kids that it isn't possible to care about something if you never knew it existed. Is it any wonder we're losing diversity and abundance of wildlife at such an alarming rate? Is it any wonder the environment is in such a state of human-induced deterioration?



Spotted Turtle.

How do we fix it?

What if there was a unit that went on for six or eight weeks of lessons entitled, say, 'Michigan Turtles'? Pick a grade. Students would learn about each of the ten species that inhabit our state, learn identification characteristics, its range, habitat requirements, behaviors, other aspects of its ecology, as well as the factors in a human-dominated landscape that may be contributing to its decline. Schools could create an opportunity to keep and care for a small turtle in the classroom to give students the first-hand

experience of nurturing it. They could be led on a field trip to see specific turtle species in their natural habitats. How could a student not love this class?

Additionally, there would be Michigan specific classes or units of varying lengths - depending on how diverse a certain taxon of wildlife was - on insects, butterflies and moths, arachnids, fish, salamanders, frogs, snakes, mammals, birds, etc., the elements of each one encompassing identification, range, habitat, behavior, ecology and conservation information. Providing personal experiences with actual live specimens in the classroom and in the field would be tantamount in these courses.

These are the subjects and the methods through which I have taught audiences of all ages, pre-school through adult, for over thirty-five years. To say that the feedback has been positive is an understatement. Absorption in these subjects instigates kids to get outside and explore. Learning that these things exist around them impels them to care. By extension, they can't help but care more, too, about the health of our land, water, and air. Natural diversity education is a powerful motivator to living sustainably, to doing right by the planet we inhabit and share. And that, really, is the bottom line.

You just came across a quote that you like, didn't you?

Yes, from Frank Lloyd Wright: "Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you."

My wish for every child is to personally discover that it is true. Your life will be vastly richer for it.

You can check out the full interview as well as more from Dempsey's Substack archive at <https://dempseyd.substack.com/>. In fact, perusal of his September 9 post, *Great Lakes in Peril*, sheds light on the bleak state of affairs that likely impelled Dave to seek answers to the 'despair' mentioned in this interview's title.

- Jim McGrath

Around the State in October

- ❖ ***Friday, October 3: 11:30am. Butterfly & Moth Larval Food Plants Presentation; Master Gardener Association Genesee County Conference, Flint.***
- ❖ ***Saturday, October 4: 11am-3:30pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Williamstown Twp Harvest Festival, Williamston.***
- ❖ ***Saturday, October 11: 1-5pm. Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Cranefest, Bellevue.***
- ❖ ***Sunday, October 12: 1-5pm. Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Cranefest, Bellevue.***



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Where else can you handle a Blue Racer?

Visit Our Nature Center by Appointment

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

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 as they swim and bask in pools on the patio! Meet, pet and feed “Milberta”, our hungry Red-footed tortoise.

Handle nearly any of our many Michigan snakes while learning how to tell them apart, then watch them gobble up worms, fish, frogs or mice. Hold or “wear” a gentle 6-foot Black Ratsnake – the largest in the state!

Frogs and salamanders, too!

Identify birds at the feeders. Take a guided walk on our trails to identify birds, bugs, insect and plant life.

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

Inquire about indoor and outdoor volunteer opportunities for high school students, adults, retirees.





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including these most recent donors...*

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More Reading for the Environmentally-concerned Citizen

We love this! Scientists fighting back against the farcical forces that have parasitized climate.gov., among other reputable governmental agencies...

<https://insideclimatenews.org/news/01102025/climate-science-available-online/>

Check this out then consider donating to help fight the fraud...

<https://www.climate.us/>

-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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