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***Frogs Stolen, We Called
the National Guard!***

It started modestly enough. At the business's inception in June of 1987, immediately upon graduation from MSU I went out and captured a garter snake, a leopard frog and a painted turtle. Naturally, educationally, I sensed that nothing grabs a young audience's attention better than the living creature. Over the next several years as opportunity presented itself I found and added another species of frog here, and another salamander, turtle or snake there. By the late 90s Carol and I stood back, took stock and realized that our growing menagerie of state-native reptiles and amphibians had expanded into something quite unprecedented. Still more species were gained through the 2000s. By 2010 we had achieved The Grand Slam of Michigan Turtles, all ten state-native species. A few years later we "grand-slammed" the frogs – all thirteen native species.

For twenty years now we've offered large and small interactive exhibits of our Michigan-native reptiles and amphibians featuring up to forty or more species at a wide array of special events with walk-by audiences. Without exception the feedback from visitors, and thus, the organizations that hire us, is overwhelmingly positive. Since many of the events are annual we are virtually guaranteed a contract to participate year after year. Thus, for instance, every June expect our exhibit to be a regular fixture at the Kirtland's Warbler Wildlife Festival in Roscommon and the Get Outdoors Day event in Baldwin. The second Saturday every September Sportsmen for Youth organizes Youth Day at the Muskegon County Fairground with dozens of activities for thousands of families in attendance. Our full exhibit is packed with visitors at all hours through the day. Michigan Audubon Society's Cranefest, celebrating the accumulation of pre-migratory Sandhill Cranes at Baker Sanctuary in Bellevue, takes place on the second weekend each October, and has contracted our exhibit many years in a row. Through the school year we exhibit within a science fair circuit of a couple dozen schools which contact us annually, as well.

What, with exposing our animals to up-close and barrier-free encounters with hoards of strangers over years, you would think that eventually, like rolls of the dice, an incident resulting in the loss, crippling, or death of an animal would occur. However, we've always believed in operating among our visitors with an assumption that they will respect the safe keeping of the animals as they interact with them, and it has paid off. For instance, remarkably, we only experience a dropped snake once in well over a thousand



Along with other species, our one and only rare pickerel frog was stolen early this summer. Perseverance and luck landed these three precious, replacement metamorphs.

handling opportunities given to visitors, young and old. Through some twenty years of exhibiting in this manner we have only had an animal “disappear” while on display on two occasions... until this June.

Detroit River Days, a weekend of eclectic entertainment situated along the river in the shadow of the Renaissance Center, occurs the third weekend each June. Over the past eight years or so the Michigan DNR has joined the event by offering a range of outdoorsy activities for all ages at Milliken State Park, several acres slightly up-river from the main attractions. Each year they contract us to set up and staff our full exhibit under a 20 x 20 tent. Our days showing the “herps” to throngs of passing inner city citizens of all ages are intense, but we know that many of the kids who get to identify all ten species of Michigan turtles while feeding them in pools at their feet may get no chance to ever experience them in the wild.



Detroit River Days visitors gather round Nature Discovery's pool of Michigan turtles.

situation as we nonchalantly pass the front desk with our load. After all, what they don't know really *can't* hurt them. We justified leaving the amphibians in place in their tanks since their presence wasn't nearly as attention-grabbing as free-swimming turtles and slithering snakes. We also would leave our large snapping turtle in place in its tank assuming no one would tangle with such a formidable-looking beast.

At this June's event we returned from the hotel on Sunday morning with the snakes and turtles to begin preparing for opening to the public. Immediately, Carol spotted the wide open lid on one of the frog tanks. We quickly looked tank to tank to find that most of our frogs were missing. The snapping turtle was still in its tank but several large basking rocks that were in the turtle pools on the ground had been dropped on top of it. Carol reached in, pulled the turtle out and let it crawl on the ground. We noticed a hint of blood rising to the surface of a couple of hairline cracks on its shell, but it did not appear to be in distress.

Despite our chagrin, we had no choice but to commence with the exhibit's operation, sans all but three frog species they somehow missed. We related the vandalism and theft to our DNR contact and made statements to several police officers throughout the afternoon. We were asked to formulate a statement of losses as well as a compensatory cost to replace them.

Keeping, then striving to keep The Grand Slam of Michigan Frogs is no easy task. We had never seen a venue that has all thirteen on display until we amassed it, and the hoops we've jumped through and the exorbitant miles we've driven to make it happen made us understand why. In our December 2014 newsletter I explained in detail: <http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Dec14.pdf>.

More presentations and exhibits featuring Michigan frogs were on the docket through the summer so we needed to get busy after replacements as soon as time allowed. It was easy to secure a number of the more common species we lost, some right out of our yard. Retrieving the less common ones, not so. It turns out, due to the July Fourth holiday we had a rare stretch of two consecutive days with no appointments, so we packed up and embarked on an overnight trip to a now-familiar natural area in central Illinois upon which

we randomly stumbled back in 2009. We found it to harbor several species in abundance that are among *our* state's rarest. The Blanchard's cricket frog, a threatened species in Michigan appears to be the most abundant species to the south. The Cope's gray tree frog and Fowler's toad are also difficult to find in Michigan but abundant down here. Two days later specimens of all three adorned our tanks.

In the above-mentioned newsletter column I described my endeavor in the dark and through the rain to secure a pickerel frog. Now, with no other options apparent I was resigned to watch for another late summer rainy night then drive the requisite miles to pursue specimens in the same place and manner.

Fortuitously, we told our friend, Yu Man Lee, a conservation scientist with the Michigan Natural Features Inventory who surveys wild populations of reptiles and amphibians for the DNR, about the incident. So happens, she had been conducting a massasauga rattlesnake survey earlier this summer on the grounds of Fort Custer National Guard Training Base located west of Battle Creek (and only a handful of miles south of the location I had secured past pickerels). She told us that in some locations on the base pickerel frogs were "everywhere," then offered to contact someone to see if we could enter to secure some.

This past Wednesday, our access was granted. We showed identification at the entry booth, briefly explained the purpose of this unusual quest and were mildly surprised that the guard didn't seem more surprised. He found our names on a list of civilians to be allowed access to the base for the day then directed us to drive to an inside check point. There, an officer presented a map much larger than our photocopy and helped us orient our route. Through our zigzag drive past fields, forests and wetlands he advised us to not wander in certain directions off the road where shooting exercises may be in progress. He also warned about the slim possibility of stumbling across errant unexploded ordnance. "If you see something unusual on or sticking out of the ground don't touch it... but note its exact location and let us know." He then mentioned an undetonated grenade they found that dated all the way back to 1913. Hmm.

We hiked off-road into and around a densely-vegetated wetland designated by Yu Man on our map. We saw no frog of any species despite the inviting habitat. As we stepped onto the road we looked at our feet and were not surprised, given the month, but had to laugh. Velvety, triangular tick-trefoil seeds adhered to nearly every cubic centimeter of fabric below the knee.

We returned to the Prius for a water break. While I drank I waded through the grass at the road's edge eyeing anything that hopped. Through myriad grasshoppers and crickets I suddenly caught the motion of a notably heavier hopper, though not much larger than the grasshoppers themselves. There, partially hidden by long blades of grass I immediately recognized the chunky dorsal spots characteristic of a pickerel frog. I dropped my net over it. A young-of-the-year, or metamorph, pickerel frog had been secured. Walking only slightly further down the road I captured a second, then Carol a third in close succession. It turned out the burry walk through the overgrowth was completely unnecessary, but we wouldn't be complaining tonight when we sat down, shoes and socks in our respective laps for a picking party over a beer.



The mink frog, a Canadian species only found in the U.P. in our state, is the last species we need to return our educational Michigan frog menagerie to "grand slam" status. Our early-September schedule is relatively light. We will not begin our specialist science lessons at Montessori Children's House, Stepping Stones Montessori, and Okemos Nursery School for another couple of weeks, so...

On Labor Day pedestrian masses may cross the bridge, but tomorrow we cross on a decidedly different agenda.

- Jim McGrath



Come Celebrate our 9th Annual Michigan SNAKES Day

Sunday, September 9 1 to 5pm \$5/person

Join us for **Michigan Snakes Day**. If you love snakes, this day is for you. If you loathe snakes, this day is *definitely* for you! Meet live specimens of 10 of our state's 17 species! Do you know anyone who is afraid of, dislikes, or otherwise has uncomfortable feelings toward snakes? Coax them into coming. We bill this event as the most benign setting you will ever encounter to help you feel better about them!

At 2pm, sit-in on the presentation, ***Facts Over Fear: What Everyone Should Know About Snakes***. While showing live Michigan-native specimens discussion touches on an array of erroneous beliefs spread through society that produce bad feelings toward these surprisingly gentle reptiles. Will a snake bite? Are snakes slimy? Will a snake chase you? Do snakes have fangs? Will a venomous snake ever appear in your yard? One question after another produces a factual explanation that sheds light on the unthreatening reality of these needlessly-persecuted reptiles. We will help you identify all of them through up-close inspection.

There's more! Watch a snake climb a tree. See snakes eating worms, fish, frogs and mice. Lots of handling and photo opportunities, too. Visit Nature Discovery's entire zoo that also includes Michigan-native turtles, frogs, salamanders and lizards. Knowledgeable staff is on hand to help visitors of all ages make the most of their visit.

Watch a Black Rat Snake eat mice. Photo ops galore!



Hawk-Watching at Lake Erie Metropark

Tuesday, September 11

8:30am to 4:30pm

Mid-September is prime time for fall migration of many birds of prey, especially if conditions are right (sunny skies, northerly air flow). Lots of migrant songbirds, too. The western tip of Lake Erie is especially good because birds of prey prefer to avoid migrating directly over such a large expanse of water which offers no thermals to aid in keeping them airborne, so they go around it. At the metropark, we catch concentrated numbers (hundreds or thousands) squeezing around the corner! This guided trip includes round-trip transportation for an intimate group of five adults. Checklists are provided to keep personal tallies of the day's finds. Contact us in advance to reserve your spot! FEE: \$65. In case of inclement weather, the trip will be rescheduled on Tuesday, September 18.



Broad-winged Hawk. Photo © Greg Smith



Saturday Gifted/Talented Youth Classes thru LCC

Carol is teaching 5-week Saturday LCC Fall GATE classes (East Campus) beginning October 20.

Science Wizards (9am-noon, Grades 2-3) Learn about Michigan wildlife, plenty of live animals in class each day! Includes a field trip to Nature Discovery.

Advanced Fun with Physics (1-4pm, Grades 5-6) Learn how to build a simple motor, generate electricity from renewable sources, build a solar cooker and more in this hands on, project based class.

To register or for more information visit lcc.edu/seriousfun and click on Fall/Spring GATE.

A Viceroy butterfly larva prepares to molt into chrysalis form.

Thank You!

To volunteers, Zachary McNalley, Jim Conroy, Elisabeth Baumann, Katherine Alstrom and Lillian Alstrom for their help with invasives-clearing and animal maintenance.

To John McCoy for another generous donation.

Our big little nature center could use volunteer help from anyone, high school-aged to adult, through the fall and beyond. Animal care, invasives-clearing, gardening, small handyman jobs, to fit your availability. Contact us!

L to R, Elisabeth Baumann, Katherine Alstrom, Jim Conroy, and Zachary McNalley saved this wild black cherry tree's life. It was destined to be strangled and killed by invasive oriental bittersweet vines.



Around the State in September

- ❖ ***Saturday, September 8: 9am to 3pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Sportsmen for Youth Day, Muskegon Co. Fairgrounds.***
- ❖ ***Sunday, September 9: 12 to 4pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; AARP Grandparents Day, Eastern H.S., Lansing.***
- ❖ ***Saturday, September 16: 10am to 3pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Salmon Festival, Grand Haven.***
- ❖ ***Saturday, September 16: 10am to 3pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Chippewa Nature Center, Midland.***
- ❖ ***Sunday, September 16: 10am to 2pm. MI Snakes Interactive Exhibit; Eastern Ingham Farmers Market, Williamston.***



Exercise the “First R”: Refuse

We’re making a concerted effort to follow the advice of Bea Johnson, the author of “Zero Waste Home,” (highlighted in our June 2018 newsletter) in dealing with our potential waste by heeding the five Rs (Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rot) and attempting to tackle them at her suggestion in this descending order. Refuse something that is presented to you in non-biodegradable packaging in favor of an unpackaged alternative. I took the photo on the left when we ordered breakfast at a diner in Grayling. Rather than open each little individually-wrapped non-dairy creamer to pour into my coffee, I asked the server if she could bring me a small carafe of milk instead. I’ve asked for this alternative in numerous restaurants over the summer and haven’t been turned down yet. If you experience an opportunity to “refuse” something packaged in lieu of an unpackaged alternative we’d love to hear about it. There are countless opportunities.

While precious air time gets swallowed up by media coverage of the daily shenanigans of our national embarrassment here is news that barely reached the surface in the past couple of weeks that you may have missed. The blatant cronyism-over-competence that festers in today’s U.S. Department of the Interior is nothing short of travesty...

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/17/interior-secretarys-school-friend-crippling-climate-research-scientists-say>

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

350.org

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