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**An Avian Morsel from a
Tropical Biome Blows
into Mid-Michigan**

The St. John's-area Swallow-tailed Kite. Local birder and photographer, Greg Smith, supplied his photos of the bird for this issue. Thanks, Greg!



In our November 2014 newsletter (<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Nov14.pdf>) I wrote about “Biomes Without Borders,” introducing the perspective that the borders shown on biome maps are anything but static; and that, in fact, elements of one biome often blow far beyond the perceived border and into other biomes, sometimes hundreds or thousands of miles away. The most evident examples come in the form of migratory birds. Even beyond the normal circannual patterns of a given species, quite often, an individual for one reason or another drifts far off course from the usual migratory corridor.

A noteworthy one is happening now in mid-Michigan, and bird enthusiasts are flocking to the site to catch the show. A Swallow-tailed Kite, largely a summer component of the Tropical Savanna Biome, has shown up outside of St. Johns, Michigan! How rare is this? We’ve never heard of one in Michigan since Nature Discovery’s inception 28 years ago. Surely, there are only a handful of noted occurrences in the state, at best.

The Swallow-tailed Kite is a large bird of prey that is shaped like, and possesses the aerial maneuvering ability of a swallow. With a wingspan of over four feet, a stark, black-and-white pattern and a markedly forked tail, the *National Audubon Society Sibley Guide to Birds* calls its identification “unmistakable.” On the wing it uses its agility to snatch dragonflies and other large insects out of the air with its talons. It will then devour them while still on the wing. From the air, it also spots then snatches grasshoppers and other large insects from treetops as well as from the ground. It will also take manageable vertebrate prey items from the ground, like small snakes and lizards. In the U.S., you’ll have to visit Florida in the summer months or adjacent regions near the Atlantic or Gulf Coast in the Southeast. The Swallow-tailed Kite migrates to Central and South America to spend the winter.

This bird can vanish from the area any day just as suddenly as it appeared, so, if you are inclined, you might want to head up to St. John’s to see it as soon as possible. Head north from the Lansing area on U.S. Hwy 127. The bird is often soaring in view of the highway, most often immediately beyond the M-

21 exit (#96). However, if you'd like to get more than a passing glimpse, exit the highway here, then make your way to the vicinity of the intersections of Williams and Avery roads. Here is a Google map of the area: <https://www.google.com/maps/@43.016541,-84.5349031,14z>. The bird has also been seen by other observers on other days along Williams, Scott and Walker roads, so, if you don't see the bird right away be sure to circuit this general area several times while paying especially close attention to the airspace over fields and wetlands.

I saw the bird on Thursday afternoon off of Avery Road west of Williams and completely in view of the traffic on 127. I knew the bird was there before I saw it, however. A half-dozen vehicles straddled the shoulder ahead. The road bustled with milling people, tripods and large lenses. For the next fifteen minutes I watched the kite soar high into the overcast, gray sky, then, a minute later,



The kite banks sharply, allowing a top view for Greg Smith's lens.

swoop low over the soybeans, sometimes appearing to rake through the tops of the plants. It may have been gleaning grasshoppers. Eventually, it soared over a treeline and remained out of sight.



Here, the kite appears to be carrying something in its talons. It skimmed the top of the soybeans several times during my brief visit. Could it be a grasshopper among some leafy bycatch? Thank you, Darlene!

I met and conversed with a number of the other observers including Darlene Friedman, a birder and photographer from Novi. She showed me photos that she had taken while lamenting that a brighter day would have enhanced the images greatly. She offered her photos for use in our newsletter.

If you would like to try to see the bird, but are wondering if it is still being sighted, visit the *Mich-listers* archive at <http://lists.envirolink.org/mailman/listinfo/mich-listers>. If you go we'd love to hear about it. You can even leave a message and/or a photo on our Facebook fan page.

Jim McGrath

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

Jim is scheduled to appear on Tuesday, September 29 at 9:15am, discussing Michigan wildlife topics. 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.



Come Celebrate our 6th Annual



Michigan SNAKES Day

Sunday, September 13 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 12 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: Things 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. Handle many of our gentle snakes like this Western Fox Snake. Photo ops galore!

Around the State in September

- ❖ **Saturday, September 5: 2 to 5pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Ludington State Park.**
- ❖ **Sunday, September 6: 10am to 2pm. “Feeding Frenzy” Interactive Exhibit; Williamston Farmers Market.**
- ❖ **Saturday, September 12: 9am to 3pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Sportsmen for Youth Day, Muskegon Co. Fairgrounds.**
- ❖ **Saturday, September 19: 10am to 3pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Salmon Festival, Grand Haven.**
- ❖ **Saturday, September 26: 9am to 2pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; DNR Park-It Event, Pinckney.**
- ❖ **Saturday, September 26: 10am. MI Turtles Presentation; Williamston Public Library.**



9th Grade students in Williamston High School’s Math & Science Academy collect insects at Legg Park in Okemos. We assist students with the collection, identification, classification and pinning techniques required for the assignment.

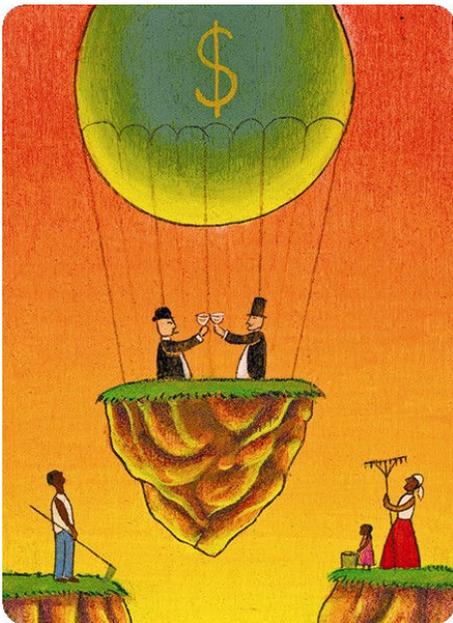
Saturday Gifted/Talented Youth Classes thru LCC

Carol is teaching 5-week Saturday LCC GATE classes (East Campus) beginning October 24.

Toy Stories (Grades 2-3) investigates the science behind toy-making. Students will design and build their own toys!

MAD Skills (Grades 6-9) uses math, science and engineering skills to develop useful, alternative-energy projects: a pedal-powered generator and a solar cooker!

To register or for more information visit www.lcc.edu/mall and click on Youth Program and Half Day Classes, or call (517) 483-1415.



From www.heifer.org.

“Land Grabbing” for Profit

World Ark is Heifer International’s quarterly educational, informational and outreach publication. Its purpose is “to further Heifer’s goals to end poverty and hunger while caring for the Earth and to raise awareness of the issues involved in this work throughout the world.”

From the Fall 2015 issue read *On the Take* by Eric Hoffner:

<http://www.heifer.org/join-the-conversation/magazine/2015/fall/on-the-take.html>.

As climate change, population growth and environmental damage shrink the amount of arable land on the planet, wealthier countries and corporations are exacerbating the processes by “land grabbing” in developing countries - displacing indigents, then ransacking their natural resources to the tune of big profits. At least one U.S. presidential candidate is all-in on the game.

Here at home, consuming and investing choices encourage these practices. Consider humanitarian aid gifts this holiday season in lieu of the usual stuff. Heifer International offers impactful suggestions. -JM

Cedar Creek Vets to the Rescue



Yes, this rat snake swallowed that big wooden pestle! We gave the snake to David Potts, the lower elementary teacher at Stepping Stones Montessori in East Lansing, over five years ago to keep as a classroom mascot. It has since grown to nearly six feet. One day in August, it escaped from its cage and roamed free in the school for a few days. David relocated it a storage closet, but it now had a mysterious, elongated, hard lump in its middle. He brought it to Nature Discovery where we tried as a team to squeeze the lump forward in its body. Suddenly, the lateral neck flesh split open and this pestle – eight inches long and two inches

wide at the base - slid out! Surprisingly to us, once the obstruction was out the snake did not appear to be in much discomfort. Dr. Wayne Beasley at Cedar Creek Veterinary Clinic (www.cedarcreekvet.com) sutured the three-inch gash. The snake is recuperating nicely! Why would it eat a wooden pestle? They used it to grind egg shells. Besides small mammals and birds, rat snakes eat eggs!

Become a fan of *Nature Discovery* on Facebook!



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