



Local birder/photographer Greg Smith provided this nice photo of the Potter Park eagle nest. Thank you, Greg!

THIS ISSUE

***Spring Break Offerings for Kids
Sunday, April 12 / Backyard Nests
Around the State in April
Coffee Break, April 23
Summer Day Camps on Website
Frog Calls CD Available
I'm Not a Scientist but I Play One on TV***

Bald Eagles Nest in Lansing

In our February newsletter I noted a first-ever tally while leading a late-January group of adults on a winter birding day around Lansing: four Bald Eagles, each spotted at a different location throughout the city in a single morning.

Bald Eagle populations plummeted in the mid-1900s, largely due to the effects of DDT and other toxins in the environment. In 1963, fewer than 500 nesting pairs were known throughout the contiguous U.S. Certainly for my generation, sightings of Bald Eagles were few or absent in Michigan throughout our childhoods and into our adult years.

Times have steadily changed for the better for our national symbol. Over a decade after the ban of DDT eagle numbers started to rise. Through the 80s, they began to round the “graphic” bend. In the 2000s they’re soaring. Now, there are well over 11,000 nesting pairs in the contiguous U.S. In Michigan, after lows of less than 100 nests recorded throughout the 70s, over 700 nests can be found within our borders today. Active nests are appearing, not only “up north,” but within a short drive from home.

While participating in the annual local Christmas Bird Count this past December, I spotted an adult Bald Eagle high in some tree branches over the Red Cedar River at Potter Park in Lansing – a first in over ten years of birding my designated route. A groundskeeper saw me watching the bird through binoculars and informed me that he had been watching a pair here almost every day since the month before. I stopped a few other times through the winter to see one or both birds in attendance. Area birders reported them regularly on a local birding list serve. Our late January birding group also spotted one of the pair on our stop at Potter Park.

As winter progressed and the eagles continued to haunt the tall trees on an island and along the floodplain, the question had to naturally be considered: Could this pair be planning to nest here? They appeared to be spending a lot of time perched in or near a rookery of Great Blue Heron nests, which has occupied the treetops on the wooded island across from the zoo entrance for years. The herons’ bulky stick nests are hard to miss from the river trail when trees are devoid of leaves from November to April.

The Bald Eagle is one of the earliest-nesting species in the state, and pairs have often shown propensities to move into heron rookeries before the rightful owners return in March. They may pick a nest to their liking then add more sticks to give it the signature mass they desire. Would this heron colony, rife with potential nest-upgrades, lure them to stay and breed?

The answer is *yes!* The female currently broods atop an “upgraded” heron nest on the island. Now is the best time to view it, as it will be much more obscured once the foliage starts to bloom in a few weeks.

Park your car in the far end of the Potter Park lot (or at the Kruger Landing parking lot off of Aurelius then walk the river trail back toward the zoo.). From the river trail, almost directly across the lot from the zoo entrance, scan the trees for the masses of bulky heron nests. The double XL built by the eagles is impossible to miss. Bring binoculars if you want to see the incubating bird’s head jutting above the rim.

The Bald Eagle takes four to five years to reach reproductive maturity. For the first three years of life its overall plumage is comprised of varied mixes of brown-and-white patches and streaks. It begins to attain a “dirty” white head and tail in its fourth year. The head and tail then become pure white the rest of its life. You may see this bird’s head with binoculars, but you will definitely see its dirty quality through a spotting scope: ergo, this must be a first nesting attempt for this young adult female.

Whether you go to see the nest or not, it’s enticing to ponder... When was the last time a Bald Eagle pair nested within Lansing city limits? Certainly well before the birth of any baby-boomer. In fact, I’d venture that it wouldn’t be inching too far out on a limb to state that no one alive today has ever seen an active eagle nest in Lansing. This might be the best incentive of all!

A cautionary flipside... Despite the recent rebound and removal from the endangered species list, Bald Eagles can be sensitive to various levels and types of human disturbance. In a phone conversation with Scott Hicks, field superintendent for the East Lansing office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, he stressed that the agency largely refrains from making eagle nest locations known to the public in order to minimize chances of disturbance.

Hicks directed me to a 2007 USFWS publication, *National Bald Eagle Management Guidelines*, included here, which, among other considerations, gives recommendations for limits on human activities in the vicinity of an active nest:

<http://www.fws.gov/southdakotafieldoffice/NationalBaldEagleManagementGuidelines.pdf>.

Bald Eagle pairs exhibit a wide range of tolerance to surrounding human activities. Since this pair has chosen to nest so close to the river trail and the busy entrance to the zoo, they must be quite tolerant of human activity. However, from November through March the river trail and zoo see usage patterns that are a mere ghost of what’s to come as the weather improves. I would anticipate disturbance from these sources to greatly outweigh the quiet shoreline viewing of a handful of respectful watchers.

Initially, I was planning on submitting a version of this column to the *Lansing State Journal*, but the conversation I had with the local FWS superintendent changed my mind. Thus, this information is dispensed solely to Nature Discovery patrons and readers of this newsletter.

Interested in a special guided appointment to view the eagle nest through our spotting scope? Contact us to set a day and time.



A 2nd-year Bald Eagle sports the brown and white pattern of youth. Photo © Steve Sage.

-Jim McGrath

There is Still Time to Enroll for Spring Break Day Camps / Field Trips



Spring Break Wildlife Day Camp

Monday & Tuesday, April 6 & 7, 9am-3pm.

For K & older.

Students can sign-up for one or both days of nature and outdoor-oriented activities. Each day will encompass interaction with our huge collection of Michigan reptiles & amphibians. Also a variety of engaging outside explorations and activities dependent on the weather, including bird-watching and exploration of our vernal pond just beginning to awaken with breeding frogs, and invertebrates galore. Hot lunch and snacks provided.

Maple River Field Trip

Tuesday, April 7; 9am-3pm

For 3rd grade & older.

Join Jim for a day of birding, wildlife watching and dike-hiking at Maple River State Game Area, north of St. Johns. Eagles, owls, waterfowl galore and a wealth of migrating songbirds! Up-close looks through our high-powered spotting scope. Participants will keep track of birds encountered on personal checklists. Pack a bag lunch and water bottle, and bring binoculars if you have them.



Kensington Metropark Field Trip

Wednesday, April 8, 9am-3pm.

For K & older.

Kensington Metropark, just east of Brighton, offers a wealth of natural opportunities on an early spring day. We will coax wild birds to take seeds out of our hands. We'll also hike trails around abundant wetlands, woods and fields, and spend time in the nature center checking out displays and watching birds at their busy feeders. Older students will be given Michigan Birds checklists and take side trips through



the park with a goal to check as many birds as possible, and get amazing up-close looks with our powerful spotting scope! All students should pack a bag lunch and water bottle. Older students can bring binoculars.

ADVANCE ENROLLMENT (required): \$55/student/day. \$48/student/day for multiple sibs and/or multiple days. Contact us by phone or email to reserve spaces. Ask us about after-care options.



Open Hours

Sunday, April 12

1 to 5pm; \$5 admission

2pm Presentation

Nesting Birds in Your Backyard

Tree Swallows can be enticed to nest by placing a standard bluebird box in middle of a wide open lawn. Photo © Steve Sage.

Many rural backyards have the potential to provide for the nesting efforts of up to two dozen species of songbirds. When you become aware of which birds are attempting to nest, then, take an active role in helping them succeed, you will add another enjoyable aspect to the time spent in your outdoor domain. Join us at 2pm for the Powerpoint presentation, *Nesting Birds in Your Backyard*. Beautiful photos and audio recordings are used to help participants learn which breeding songbirds to expect in your yard through the spring and summer. Learn which birds prefer to nest in tall trees, in evergreens, in dense shrubbery, in long grass, in cavities, and in other locations. Tips are offered on how to first become aware that a species may be nesting close at hand before even finding the nest, then, how to go about discovering where a specific nest may be hidden. Learn what you can do to encourage certain species to nest as well as which birds you should take action to discourage by any means. Discussion of common predators and parasites responsible for nesting failure will also be discussed.

At the presentation's conclusion participants are encouraged to join us on a guided walk around the Nature Discovery grounds. We will identify birds, explore potential sites for nests, and enjoy many other natural aspects of the advancing season.



A Song Sparrow hunches down in an attempt to avoid detection. It built the nest in a dense juniper bush just inches outside our window.

As during all open Sundays, bring the kids to visit our interactive zoo of Michigan native reptiles and amphibians before, during or after the presentation. Hold snakes, feed turtles, and watch frogs, salamanders, and snakes being fed. Great photo ops! Guided outdoor exploration opportunities, too!



MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
**SCIENCE
 FESTIVAL**



Nature Discovery will be exhibiting The Grand Slam of Michigan Turtles at Michigan State University's annual Science Festival, April 18 & 19. For a full schedule of festival events, April 15-19, visit <http://sciencefestival.msu.edu/>.

Around the State in April

- ❖ Saturday, April 12: 10am-3pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Earth Day Festival, UM-Flint, Flint.
- ❖ Wednesday, April 13: 6-7:30pm. Michigan Snakes Exhibit; Fairview Elem., Lansing.
- ❖ Saturday, April 18: MI Birds & Butterflies; Crossroads Church, Williamston.
- ❖ Saturday/Sunday, April 18/19: 10am-4pm/12-4pm. Michigan Turtles Exhibit; MSU Science Festival, East Lansing.
- ❖ 1pm. Michigan Amphibians Presentation; Lincoln Park Public Library, Lincoln Park.
- ❖ Wednesday, April 22: 9am-2pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; MDEQ Earth Day Celebration, Constitution Hall, Lansing.
- ❖ 5:30-7pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Okemos Public Montessori, Okemos.
- ❖ Thursday, April 23: 6:30-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Kinawa 5-6 School, Okemos.
- ❖ Saturday, April 25: 9:30am-12pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Water Festival, Cannon Township.



Catch Nature Discovery on LCC Radio's Coffee Break Thursday, April 23

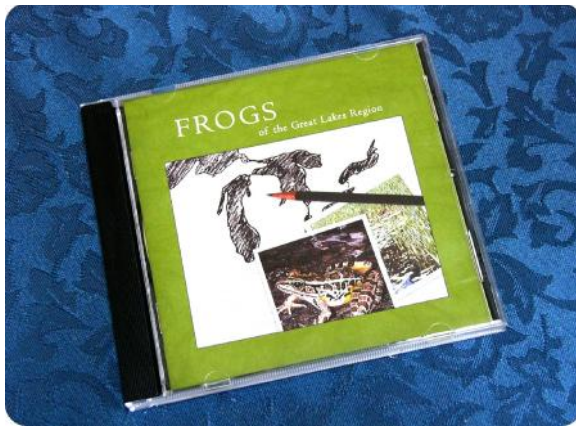
Jim is scheduled to appear on Thursday, April 23 at 9:15am, discussing seasonal wildlife. The show airs weekdays from 9 to 10am on 89.7 FM. Listen live online at lcc.edu/radio/onair/ or watch it live (or later in the day at 6pm) online at lcc.edu/tv/watch. We'll post a reminder on our Facebook fan page.

Summer 2015 Day Camps

Information is now on the website. Click on this link for details, fees and enrollment.

<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/summercamps.pdf>





Wood Frogs (pictured), Spring Peepers, and Chorus Frogs have just begun singing and egg-laying. Learn who's calling with Nature Discovery's CD, Frogs of the Great Lakes Region. Visit our website to order.



“I’m Not a Scientist but I Do Play One on TV”

“...occasionally..., hell, more than occasionally.” – Marco Morano, founder of Climatedepot.com.

MERCHANTS OF DOUBT A FILM BY ROBERT KENNER A SONY PICTURES CLASSICS RELEASE



The film, *Merchants of Doubt*, opened at select theaters on March 6. It is based on the 2010 book of the same title (which we just picked up) by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway. The subtitle reads, “How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming.” Here is a synopsis:

<http://www.freep.com/story/entertainment/movies/2015/04/03/merchants-doubt-movie-review/70836742/>

In an internet search I couldn't find a single theater in the Greater Lansing area slated to show this. Most theater proprietors probably feel there is not enough public interest. Unsettlingly, when climate change action ranks a dismal 19th on a list of issues of importance to the public during election season, they are probably right!

If any of our readers are interested in seeing this at a theater in the Detroit or Grand Rapids area, please contact us. We'd love to get a group together in the coming weeks to carpool to one!

-JM

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