



*A male chorus frog emits its ascending mechanical "creek" from a flooded roadside on Williamston Road.*

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## ***Acknowledge the Chorus Frog***

I take special delight in hearing the chorus frog breeding song in early spring (Listen here: [http://naturediscovery.net/audio/western\\_chorus.wav](http://naturediscovery.net/audio/western_chorus.wav)). It might be because it is almost always the first amphibian harbinger that catches my ear on a fifty-ish degree late March day as I pass a roadside temporary pool. It might also be because I have to work so hard to put an eye on this tiny, brown, striped tree frog. Indeed, if it wasn't for the vocalizations in these wet depressions across the local rural landscape I'd be under the impression this is a very rare frog. Why is that? Michigan is home to six species occupying the tree frog family, Hylidae, but the chorus frog is a member that behaves as if it is not.

When you think of tree frogs, their hallmark trait also automatically comes to mind - an ability to stick to vertical surfaces and, thus, to climb above ground-level. Gray tree frogs scale the siding of rural homes as well as shrubs and small trees. Spring peepers cling and clamor up the stalks of goldenrods, brambles and grasses, sometimes several feet off the ground, feeding on appropriately tiny flies, hoppers and other insects found here. This behavior makes them easier to notice from our elevated vantage.

Not so the chorus frog... Outside the breeding season it occupies overgrown habitats dominated by long grasses, sedges and other herbaceous plants. Don't expect to find one climbing up or sticking to the blades, though. It chooses to remain ground-bound among the tangled base of this dense growth, and almost always completely out of sight where it feeds on an abundance of miniscule invertebrates. This quality, along with markings that mimic dead, matted grass, makes it maddeningly difficult to visually locate.

One more landscape characteristic is necessary for this species' presence in open, overgrown habitat - a place to breed; these days, hardly a "given." Many open spaces appear to have all the qualities to the chorus frog's liking, except for one - a suitable depression in the topography where a temporary or vernal pond, free from chemical contamination or siltation from adjacent agriculture or development, can allow it a chance to reproduce. Once freckled with thousands of them, over three quarters of our state's vernal wetlands have been drained or degraded by human activities to the point that chorus frogs and a host of other amphibians can no longer effectively reproduce in them. The vernal waters that exist today are nonetheless under continuous threat from federal and local influences lobbying to weaken wetland regulations for profit's sake.

Enter our go-to mantra when discussing the struggle to exist that so many wild species endure at the whim of man: *Take away its ability to make more of itself, and it's going down!*

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My argument to *acknowledge* the chorus frog and protect what it needs to exist segues back to still another reason this particular frog holds a special place in my psyche; an experience that, in fact, contributed substantially to my chosen life direction. As an early-teen naturalist growing up on the northwest side of Chicago on an early-April Saturday circa 1971 my cohort in nature exploration, Goose, and I took the Pulaski bus north for a few miles and got off near the end of the line at Bryn Mawr Avenue. A quarter-mile walk down the mostly undeveloped street led us to open spaces around some freight train tracks that ran behind a cemetery. We were keen to explore the surrounding acres of meadows and woods to see what wild slithering, hopping, scampering or flying things the natural growth may harbor.

It was here that I heard, then saw the first chorus frogs of my life. The early spring sunshine warmed the water in a shallow depression choked with dead, faded, mostly-matted grass. Scattered, wispy clumps emerged from the surface. The cacophony of ascending reverberations described like *thumbnails-dragged-across-the-teeth-of-combs* was almost deafening! When we approached the soggy edge, however, the closest invisible frogs abruptly stopped calling. The frogs on the far side continued strongly though, so we waded around the dry, grassy perimeter toward them, only to find that they, too, ceased calling when we got too close. Wouldn't you know it? Now the ones we had first disturbed into silence across the pond started calling again. When we returned – sure enough they stopped, but the ones on the far side again started calling, and so it went. Trying to see one of these tiny chorus frogs was obviously not going to be easy, and it had become obvious that we were bound to never see one unless we got our feet wet, so in we went...



Over the course of our afternoon among them we waded slowly back and forth peering into the grassy tangles under the surface. The sun's rays penetrated the clear water allowing for excellent visibility. We marveled at the abundance of all kinds of unidentified invertebrate creatures that flitted through the water column or darted into the hidden depths to get out of our path. Before long we spotted then caught our first frog. We found a metal coffee can littered next to the tracks and fashioned a makeshift lid with a broken chunk of plywood, then added the frog, more water and a handful of the wet, dead grass from which we had plucked it. We soon found a small cluster of chorus frog eggs adhered to a submerged twig, then another. We found a pair of chorus frogs stuck in amplexus and added them to the contents, too.



The can sat on my lap on the bus ride home. One frog started calling under the lid prompting other passengers to quizzically turn in their seats. When we got back Goose dumped the contents into a cage in his yard. That evening I told my parents and some of my older siblings about our find – breeding chorus frogs right here in the city! I was not wholly surprised by their reception. Not only had no one ever heard of a chorus frog, but none seemed nearly as excited over the discovery of this natural phenomenon.

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Early the following spring Goose and I wanted to experience the breeding chorus frogs again, so on a bright sunny Saturday we jumped back on the bus then walked down Bryn Mawr. This time, however, overlapping, thick tire tracks of dried mud striped the pavement in the street next to the sidewalk. Big

chunks of it, now dried, were randomly scattered in the street as if they had sloughed off the wheels of a caravan of rumbling trucks, but we thought nothing of it until we crossed the tracks and looked out to where the grassy pond existed exactly one year prior.

We were sickened at the sight. A bright yellow, mud-spattered bulldozer sat idle at the edge of acres of destruction; the once-lushly vegetated earth was scraped bare, smattered with small, scum-coated puddles of various sizes and shapes. Broken brush and tree stumps were pushed into twisted piles around the perimeter. Several other construction trucks were parked around the site. Deep ruts from their comings and goings were filled with murky mire. Near the street a large, clean, colorful realtor's sign displayed a sketch of neat, multi-story buildings surrounded by the perfect lines of curbs, sidewalks, driveways and globularly-groomed little trees. Below it, a written promise of new, affordable rental units coming soon.

The absence of chorus frog song was deafening. How long had this population bred here before this apocalypse? We didn't cry (not cool for any thirteen year old boy), but felt like we could. The bus ride home was a somber one. We talked through our frustration, convinced that no one, from the realtor to the heavy-equipment operators hired to raze the habitat had any idea what a chorus frog was. If we told them they would merely shrug and get back to the task of destruction that they called "development."

Can there be an "environmental" loss of innocence? If so, for me this was it. Up until then, beginning in my backyard and neighborhood as a little kid I searched for and discovered myriad wild life forms strictly to feed my personal, eager curiosity - marveling at life's diversity of form, function and, each in its own way, beauty. Now I had experienced not just a personal loss but witnessed a novel environmental injustice, a profound violation, a local, community-sanctioned execution that I felt powerless to stop.

Thus began a new, more serious impetus to my study and understanding of nature: getting others to know. I reasoned that it would be hard to care about something if you never knew about it and easy to destroy something if you never learned about it. On the other hand, those who knew would be more likely to care. Those who cared would be more conscientious about how their activities on the landscape affect the quality of wild life that resides there. People who knew and cared would also become more adamant about doing whatever it takes to keep the land, water, air and atmosphere healthy for quality of all life on Earth - human and otherwise. In short, it was the formulation of a reason and a will to live life sustainably.

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Chorus frogs, among other species, are declining more rapidly today, both locally and beyond. Some is due to continued habitat loss. More is due to the increasingly damaging effects of climate change. On our property protecting the habitat has shown to no longer be enough to avert frog population crashes. Extreme weather events are driving reproductive failure at an accelerating rate on our vernal ponds. In the mid-90s I audio-recorded chorus frogs calling here. On our educational/environmental CD, *Frogs of the Great Lakes Region* (detailed on our website), a segment features a steady blare of overlapping, rising mechanical *creeks*. Over the past few springs we've heard only one or two. Will this be the first spring that we hear none? Meanwhile, the abundance of frog song compiled some two decades ago and arranged on the CD to help citizens identify species by ear is looking more these days like a historical document of what once was, and may likely never be again.



Acknowledge the chorus frog where and while it still exists. Appreciate its call (going on now and over the next few weeks). Protect the vernal wetlands where it still breeds as well as the surrounding habitat in which it forages. And above all, help someone else to know so that they, too, will care and act sustainably.

-Jim McGrath





## ***Catch Us on LCC Radio's Coffee Break Friday, April 12***

Jim is scheduled to appear on Friday, April 12 at 9:15am, discussing our Sunday program and other spring things. The show airs weekdays from 9 to 10am on 89.7 FM. Listen live online at [lcc.edu/radio/onair/](http://lcc.edu/radio/onair/) or watch it live (or later in the day at 6pm) online at [lcc.edu/tv/watch](http://lcc.edu/tv/watch). We'll post a reminder on our Facebook fan page.

## ***Nesting Birds in Your Backyard Sunday, April 14 Doors open from 1 to 5pm Admission: \$5/person***



*A Song Sparrow sits on a well-hidden nest among the spiny tangles of a juniper bush.*

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



*An Eastern Bluebird nestling steels itself for its maiden flight.*

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 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.

As during all open Sundays, 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!

## *Around the State in April*

- ❖ Saturday, April 6: 10am-4pm. Michigan Frogs Exhibit; MSU Science Festival, East Lansing.
- ❖ Wednesday, April 12: 6:30-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit, Hiawatha Elementary, Okemos.
- ❖ Saturday, April 13: 9am-2pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Mott Community College, Flint.
- ❖ Thursday, April 18: 5:30-7:30pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Lansing Charter Academy, Lansing.
- ❖ Saturday, April 20: 1pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Presentation; Seven Ponds Nature Center, Dryden.
- ❖ Wednesday, April 24: 9am-2pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; MDEQ Earth Day Celebration, Constitution Hall, Lansing.
- ❖ Saturday, April 27: 10am-3pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Huron Schools STEAM Showcase, Bad Axe.
- ❖ Sunday, April 28: 10:30am-12:30pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Edgewood Church, East Lansing.



## *The 2019 Summer Day Camp Schedule*

is on our website now! Click this link:

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

## ***CEDAR CREEK***

### *The Official Vets of Nature Discovery!*

*Our 11-year-old female black rat snake has been touched and handled by tens of thousands of people throughout her life and is our most utilized ambassador to humanity. She recently developed a mouth infection. A visit to Cedar Creek Vet Clinic and a round of antibiotics later she'll be back on the job in short order. To learn more about Cedar Creek Vets go to [www.cedarcreekvet.com](http://www.cedarcreekvet.com).*

*Cedar Creek licensed veterinary technician, Holly Scott, administers some TLC.*



## *If Greed is a Deadly Sin...*

What adjective do you attach to the said sin if it is committed not by an individual, but by a humongous global corporation like Exxon? Deadly for the entire planet, so 'anthrocidal,' 'biocidal' or 'geocidal' sin could apply. Is "too big to fail," by extension also "too big to be held accountable?" This series from *Inside Climate News* explains why we would consider the executives at Exxon the most negatively-impactful sinners in the history of civilization.

<https://insideclimatenews.org/content/Exxon-The-Road-Not-Taken>

The American Farm Bureau Federation, among the most powerful lobbies in Washington, has been bedpartners with Exxon for decades and completely in-step with its climate change denial strategy. Reading this column helped me to better understand why farmers, and therefore, so much of rural America is adamant about supporting the corrosive entity that squats in our White House.

<https://insideclimatenews.org/news/24102018/farm-bureau-climate-change-denial-farmers-crop-insurance-subsidies-drought-future-at-risk>

-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*



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

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