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## **FAR WORSE Than POISON IVY**



Ecologically speaking, that is..., which, as far as I'm concerned, is of *far greater* concern than a temporary rash. This vine wreaks long-term ecological destruction. It chokes the life out of mature healthy trees. When left unchecked it quite literally tears whole forest ecosystems to the ground. The above photo should alarm everyone – like something out of a horror movie, a mature healthy native wild black cherry tree is engulfed by a constricting net of alien invaders.

I've written about invasive Oriental Bittersweet in past *Wild Times* issues, but within a broader discussion of other prevalent invasives. To varying degrees all threaten the ecological integrity of our north Williamston property's natural community as well as others far beyond. At the risk of some informational overlap these columns are still worth perusing by any concerned reader...

(May 2014) *I Hate to Spoil Your Spring, But...*

<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20May14%20%282%29.pdf>

(December 2017) *Invasion Via the Berry Snatchers*

<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Dec17.pdf>

(June 2019) *Invasives Update a Bittersweet Reality*

<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20June19.pdf>

(May 2020) *We Need an All Out War on Invasives*

<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20May20.pdf>

In early April 2020, pretty much right at the onset of pandemic shutdowns, I had posted a photo tutorial on our Facebook page illustrating the identification of four woody vines that are prevalent in Mid-



*Oriental Bittersweet berries in winter. You can still find some of last year's crop dangling among the bare branches of trees and shrubs in April. All four vine species discussed here disperse their seeds by way of birds that eat them then scatter the seeds in their droppings.*

Michigan, and specifically how to tell them apart during the seasons when they are leafless. Photos of Poison Ivy and Oriental Bittersweet were accompanied by those of Virginia Creeper and Wild Grape. I was surprised at the level of interest and response. With almost 200 shares and over 30,000 people reached in all, as of today it still holds the record for our most-viewed post.

It is no accident that the most ecologically insidious of the bunch, Oriental Bittersweet, is the only one that is not native. Since vines in general require a host to climb it could be argued, though, that any of them negatively affect a given tree or shrub to some degree. The vine scales a trunk or snags a low hanging branch in its species-specific manner then wends its way upward along its host's structure. Its own leaves then compete with the native tree's leaves for life-sustaining energy from the sun's rays.

Don't be too hasty to judge symbiotic relationships between native organisms in a natural community as *good* or *bad*. At the individual level, a fox catching and eating a rabbit may be bad for that particular rabbit, but the effect on the rabbit's population and/or the resulting shift toward 'balance' within that community may well be a good thing. I rarely see a native tree outright killed by native Wild Grape, Poison Ivy or Virginia Creeper, but woe to the tree upon which an alien Oriental Bittersweet grows. The outcome is *always* the same. It may take several years – maybe even up to a decade – but the tree is doomed without intervention.

Clearing any plant matter, whether tree, shrub or vine, is a less messy job during times of year when they are foliage-free. It also helps that the ground is not frozen, should you decide to uproot it. Ergo, *now*. But first, you need to be able to identify each of these vines without their foliage - Oriental Bittersweet, to remove it; Poison Ivy, to avoid it (or remove at your own risk); Wild Grape and Virginia Creeper, to generally suffice to let them be in order to perform their ecological functions.

## ORIENTAL BITTERSWEET

Once it reaches upward and manages to grasp another form of plant life a string-thin bittersweet sprout's corkscrewing life-journey has begun. It will twist around and up a grass stalk, a tall weed or small shrub, and eventually manage to make contact and curl around a low-hanging branch beneath a healthy tree. The vine gains girth quickly and continues to thicken throughout its life. In many Lower Michigan forests these days it is not difficult to locate a gray-barked 'snake,' one or two inches in diameter, spiraling up a tree's trunk. Sometimes two or three such ropes may engulf the same trunk, crisscrossing and overlapping as they climb and squeeze.

A few years ago just over our north neighbor's property line I located a veritable 'anaconda' constricting a tall Wild Black Cherry. The vine was almost six inches thick near the ground. The tree was still alive, but in grave shape. Almost all limbs had been snapped off beneath a sparsely-leaved, remnant of a no-doubt once robust canopy. I cringe to think of the tremendous weight and counter-force imposed upon the bound tree - like a dog that wants to run, yet, constrained by a choke-collar on a leash tethered firmly to the ground. I sawed through the bittersweet to release the tree from its shackles... probably a year or two too late to save it, though. No leaves emerged the following May.

The following photos and captions will help you become familiar with the characteristics of Oriental Bittersweet during the 'leafless' seasons.



*Oriental Bittersweet often spirals up a tree trunk.*



*Two bittersweet vines will twist upon each other to form a braid.*



*Young bittersweets without a support will bend, willow-like.*

## POISON IVY vs. VIRGINIA CREEPER

This pair of native woody vines are often found occupying the same habitat. It is not unusual to find them growing side by side up a tree trunk or fencepost, or even intermingling as they trail along the ground when there are no structures immediately available to climb. From May to September it is easy to tell the two apart since the compound leaf of Poison Ivy has three leaflets and Virginia Creeper is palmately compound with five.

However, even during the leafless months of their existence it is fairly easy to tell them apart with a bit of close scrutiny. When young and relatively thin, both vines cling tightly to their host structures with sporadically-occurring ‘aerial roots’ all along their length that adhere to the structure’s surface. I describe the aerial roots of Poison Ivy as *thin, dirty-looking threads*. By contrast the aerial roots of Virginia Creeper are paler and notably thicker - *spaghetti-like*. As either vine ages on a tree trunk or fence post it becomes stouter, and the aerial roots fill in until the “dirty hairs” or “spaghetti” is quite continuous along its length.

When trailing along the ground both vine species tend to remain thin. The horizontal runners are more often than not partially or fully hidden among grasses, other plant growth or under leaf litter, however, regularly along their length vertical shoots sprout upward, each with the potential to grow aerial roots and begin to cling, should it come in contact with any other upright structure. The informed eye can spot these thin little shoots poking above matted grasses, leaves, other organic debris, or even from a blanket of snow. How to tell if the shoot is Poison Ivy or Virginia Creeper? It’s not that hard...

The rising shoot from a Virginia Creeper is not only substantially stouter than that of Poison Ivy. It usually has a small false terminal bud at its tip that is much more rounded than the bud of Poison Ivy. It also



*Poison Ivy: ‘dirty threads.’*



*Virginia Creeper: ‘spaghetti.’*

sports large, pale ‘leaf scars’ – flat, shield-shaped spots on the stem where last summer’s leaf was attached. Atop a thinner Poison Ivy shoot the false terminal bud is thin, and slightly curved. Its leaf scars are small and thin enough as to not stand out on the stem. Maybe not quite worth a thousand words, but these photos provide a valuable supplement to the written descriptions...



*Young Poison Ivy and Virginia Creeper side by side.*



*A Virginia Creeper shoot is stouter than that of Poison Ivy.*



*A Poison Ivy shoot is topped by a thin, slightly curved bud.*

## WILD GRAPE

The blanket term refers to any wild-growing vines in the genus, *Vitis*, some of which may hybridize. The leaf contour of the majority of grapes in our neighborhood seem to be closest to Riverbank Grape. In contrast to the first three woody vines, Wild Grape grows in a draping rather than clinging mien up and over limbs of trees and fencerows. A vine becomes established on a host structure by way of a thin, pliable, fork-tipped tendril that grows opposite a leaf on the stem. The tendril tip curls around any branch or twig of a shrub, a low-hanging tree branch or to another vines that it touches. Once a vine has established itself atop a firm limb of a host, it no longer needs the tendrils. They desiccate and die over the winter but are easy to find on the last growing season’s vine growth.

Grape vines quickly thicken and attain a distinctive shreddy brown bark that peels along its length. They often hang loosely from tree limbs and dangle under a tree like thick brown deteriorating ropes.



*Grapes have brown shreddy bark.*



*This grape dangles from a hickory.*



*Dried, curly tendrils.*



*An Oriental Bittersweet pulled from the ground exhibits a bright orange root.*

## BITTERSWEET REMOVAL

Methods of cutting, pulling or otherwise removing Oriental Bittersweet are straightforward. Grayish brown, smooth-textured, flexible ‘vinelings’ that haven’t yet established themselves on a host, sprout from the ground throughout infested woods and are distinctive among other leafless plant life. They can be pulled by hand with minimal effort. Unearthed roots exhibit a bright orange hue.

Larger bittersweets that have climbed well over your head can be cut at their point of emergence from the ground with limb loppers or a saw. The stump can then be spot-treated with herbicide or a less toxic blend of salt, dish-washing detergent and vinegar in water.

\*\*\*

Would you like to arrange an in-person experience identifying these four vines and removing Oriental Bittersweet? Just contact us to make an appointment!

*-Jim McGrath*

## *Around the State in April*

- ❖ Thursday, April 21: 6:30-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Bennett Woods Elementary, Okemos.
- ❖ Saturday, April 23: 11am-12:30pm. MI Turtles Presentation; AFFEW Earth Day, Ludington.
- ❖ Tuesday, April 26: 5-7pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; North Huron School, Kinde.

*We wish to extend appreciation to our many supporters over the years, including these most recent donors...*

*Jan Heminger  
Shannon Nobles  
Andria & Jim Slater*

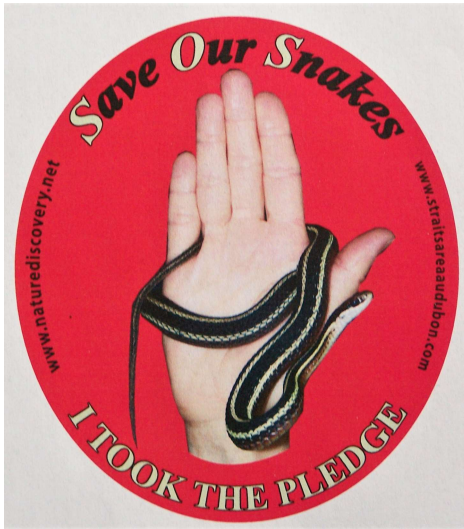
# *Kathy Bricker*

## *Wildlife Conservation Champion, Educator, & Environmental Advocate*



Our dear friend and a demonstrably dear friend to diversity of life on Earth passed away on March 18<sup>th</sup>.

*During a Snakes Alive program Kathy shows baby rat snakes to two especially nervous middle school students in Mackinaw City while assuring them of their gentle nature.*



In close proximity to her passing, Kathy was honored with a lifetime achievement award from the Northern Michigan Environmental Action Council:

<https://www.cheboygannews.com/story/news/2022/03/24/bricker-receives-lifetime-achievement-award-work-protect-environment/7131185001/>

Kathy's tireless dedication to these ends impacted us and our business greatly when she and her husband Jim approached us about what turned into a years-long endeavor in bringing presentations featuring our live Michigan snake menagerie to Northern Michigan schools. After twelve years and thousands of snake-educated students, the annual project was necessary halted at the onset of COVID in early 2020. What we assumed to be a temporary pause turned out, instead, to be the end of an era.

Appropriately, Kathy's name has popped up in many past Nature Discovery newsletter columns related to our shared endeavors, the most recent this past November. We and everyone she touched will miss her.

To Kill a Hognose Snake

<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Mar15.pdf>

Snakes in "Straits"

<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Apr16.pdf>

SAAS Responds to SOS

<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Dec18.pdf>

The Pledge

<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Mar19.pdf>

Migrants Over Mackinac

<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Nov21.pdf>

# Nature Discovery

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## 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 families are welcome to schedule a safe, intimate outdoor or indoor 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 unmatched by a trip to a conventional zoo! We will bring snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders out of tanks to interact with adults or students of any age or grade-level. Currently, mask-wearing is optional during indoor time.



*Hand-feed lettuce to “Milberta.”*

Identify and feed “the grand slam of Michigan turtles” - all ten species native to our state! Meet, pet and feed “Milberta”, our always hungry Red-footed tortoise.

Handle any or all of Michigan’s three species of garter snakes while learning how to tell them apart, then watch them gobble up worms and live tadpoles. Hold or “wear” a gentle 6-foot Black Rat Snake – the largest in the state!

Many more snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders to identify and feed. Take a guided walk on our trails to identify birds and bird song, trees, vines, and invasive plants in early spring. More outside activity descriptions on the following page!

Ask about arranging weekly or monthly visits, or regarding custom natural science lessons to supplement your student’s interests and grade-specific science requirements.

Contact us for more info or to make an appointment most any day or evening.

# Nature Discovery

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## Michigan-specific Nature/Wildlife Education in the Great Outdoors

### SPRING Edition

There is no better season to be outside, and Nature Discovery is here to enhance your experience. The activity can take place out back here at our center or elsewhere at a designated natural area.



#### WHEN

Virtually any day, any time by appointment. Specific “hours of operation” don’t exist because we live here!

Based on when it is convenient for you and the area of interest you choose to pursue for your guided experience your appointment time may better be scheduled during the morning, afternoon or evening. Same-day appointments are even okay. Just give a call to confirm our availability and we could meet by the afternoon!



Photo by Greg Smith

#### TOPICS & ACTIVITIES

The following list is far from complete but may inspire ideas for other subjects, venues and activities. Remember, we have decades-worth of knowledge about the local natural world at your disposal, not to mention decades of experience in sharing it with students of all ages!

##### ➤ VERNAL POND ENCOUNTERS

Two vernal ponds exist on the back half of our private home-based nature center’s six acres. In fact, no kidding, we bought this house in 1989 because of the presence of these ponds. Did you know that the vernal pond is considered the most biologically rich natural community in temperate regions of the world? It’s a naturalist’s playground!



- **Breeding frogs!** Currently, chorus frogs, spring peepers and wood frogs are calling abundantly and sometimes deafeningly on our ponds. Toads, tree frogs and green frogs will hit the ponds in the coming weeks. Take a guided walk around the edges while identifying each species “by ear” and learning more about their life cycles through the year, other aspects of their ecology, and discussion of the human-induced factors that are driving their declines.
- **Vernal Pond Wade: Day or Night!** A healthy vernal pond teems with a dizzying abundance and diversity of invertebrate life. Wade in with a small bucket and a net then start scooping. Specimens can be dumped into a pan for identification. You can even take a bucketful with you to inspect more closely at home. A **wade after dark** is especially enchanting. Bring a strong-beamed flashlight or headlamp to witness how the invertebrate life kicks into another gear under the cover of darkness. The volume of the **spring peepers will blow you away**.



#### ➤ **BIRDS BY SIGHT & BY SOUND**

Do you hear it? The volume, diversity and intensity of singing birds is growing by the day as individuals claim nesting territories and migrants return. Guided walks on our property (or at another location suggested by you or us) aid participants in **identifying every species** by sight and “by ear.” A **Michigan Birds checklist** is given to each participating adult or family to keep track of species encountered. Bring binoculars if you have a pair. Otherwise, we can lend you a quality pair.



#### ➤ **THE “WALKABOUT”**

Here’s a combination of **exercise, fresh air and natural instruction**. Join Jim on a walk around our country block, a 3.4-mile trek that starts and ends on our driveway. At an easy pace combined with brief stops the entire circuit can be done in less than 90 minutes. We’ll identify birds by sight and sound, plus trees, shrubs, other plant life and wildlife as we pass a diversity of **fields, woodlots, wetlands** and roadside growth. Jim will also point out roadside insect life that many casual observers would miss. Would you like to get to know the birds, flora and other fauna along the rural roads you walk around your own neighborhood? Make an “on-site” appointment.



### ➤ ON NATURE'S TERMS

No specific “theme.” Just random **natural life as we encounter it** or as it finds us in the yard, on the trail, at pond-side, and even in the skies overhead. Identification and discussion of birds, bugs, trees, vines, shrubs, and invasive growth. If you can’t decide on one of the above options or you just want to get a general feel for the experience and potential for future visits, this is a very good way to start.



### PRICING

We purposely set a ‘donation’ for visits here at a minimum of **\$5/person/hour** (min. \$15 for the first hour) so as not to exclude anyone who would like to participate but who cannot afford to pay more. However, if you have the means and find your time with us to have been well worthwhile we will appreciate any extra donation based on what you can afford.

The 90-minute “**Walkabout**” rate is a minimum of \$15 for one individual and \$10 for every extra individual from the same group. Pond wading and off-site activities require additional fees. Cash or check is preferred. Ask about Paypal or credit/debit payment options. too.



### *Volunteer to Save the Forest...*

Adults and high school students. Want to get out of the house into a natural landscape AND do something for its benefit? Help us save our woods! This photo shows alien, invasive oriental bittersweet engulfing and strangling a healthy, native, wild black cherry tree. Jim will introduce you to this, as well as the invasive shrub, Amur honeysuckle, and the invasive biennial, garlic mustard – each in its own way destroying the ecology of this and nearly every other natural area on private and public properties. Learn methods for removing them, then come to the rescue.

The removed alien growth accumulates rapidly, so we regularly light a bonfire to burn what we’ve cut.

Want to learn more about invasive plants on your own rural property? Schedule an on-site appointment!

### *Field Birding Day Camp*

**June 13-16; 8am to 2pm; 5<sup>th</sup> gr & older**

Enroll your student in this whirlwind 4-day adventure - the focus, to encounter as many birds as possible in a variety of locations and habitats. Each day we’ll head in a different direction within an hour drive to see up to 90 bird species, many of which you can’t find just anywhere. Birders will keep their own personal checklists. Bring a good pair of binoculars. We can lend you some, too. **FEE: \$325 (\$150 deposit).**



## Summer Day Camp Update

Prior to offering weeks for general enrollment this summer, we offered a “create your own” day camp where collaborating parents could choose one of six specific weeks of 4-day day camps (9am to 3pm) on a first-come basis for your personalized group of up to 5 students (sibs, friends), ages 7 and older.

This format generated strong feedback! As of this newsletter’s publication only one week remains: July 18-21. Contact us if you’d like to enroll your student for this week.

**COST: \$300 per student, 7 yrs & older (Roster maximum 5). A 50% deposit is required to reserve a space.**



## Opposing Perspectives on Environmental Ethics

*Science for Sustainability vs. Politics for Personal Profit*

This link to an interview with Scott Weidensaul, author of "A World On The Wing: The Global Odyssey Of Migratory Birds," discusses amazing adaptations and migratory feats of birds across the planet, and their alarming declines across the globe due to human-induced habitat loss and climate change.

<https://www.npr.org/programs/fresh-air/2022/04/01/1090045513/fresh-air-for-april-1-2022-bird-migration?showDate=2022-04-01>

As opposed to this NYT column about West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin, whose personal fortune was amassed through his investment in the burning of ‘waste coal’, and the political influence he wields to keep it that way. “Oh, Li-Gark!” The three statements in red below could all be personally directed at him.

[https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/27/climate/manchin-coal-climate-conflicts.html?campaign\\_id=9&emc=edit\\_nn\\_20220328&instance\\_id=56905&nl=the-morning&regi\\_id=97652655&segment\\_id=86760&te=1&user\\_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/27/climate/manchin-coal-climate-conflicts.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20220328&instance_id=56905&nl=the-morning&regi_id=97652655&segment_id=86760&te=1&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e)

-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*

*Scientific findings should never be distorted or influenced by political considerations.*

*- from President Biden’s Memorandum on Restoring Trust in Government through Scientific Integrity and Evidence-Based Policymaking.*



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Cowspiracy.com

[ Union of  
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