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The perceived beauty or ugliness of this harmless Eastern Garter Snake is in the eye of the educated vs. uneducated beholder.

The acronyms will become clear momentarily...

At an outdoor event, surrounded by a slew of other tables and activities a sixty-ish woman meandered toward our live Michigan reptiles & amphibians exhibit. I watched her eyes survey our tanks and the turtle pool then lock on the large rat snake draped around my shoulders. She abruptly froze, regarded us suspiciously for several seconds at arms-length, then turned away with a grimace muttering, "That thing is *ugly!*" I shrugged, secure in the realization that a certain percentage of the populace is beyond educating, when an eight-year-old girl spotted the snake. Her face lit with surprise as she rushed to my side, reached to pet it, and exclaimed, "It's so *beautiful!*" The same view of the same snake, yet, perfectly polar perceptions within a heartbeat of one another.

The juxtaposition illustrates much more than the value of education. How about the damaging effects of "miseducation?" Chances are the girl had little or no education about snakes prior to this experience. Her youth limited her exposure to dicey information at the hands of ill-informed "teachers." Thus, she was able to perceive the gentle, calmly-exploratory mien of the creature through more objective, untainted lenses. On the other hand, the woman, by virtue of years of exposure to negative and false messages perhaps disseminated by unqualified snake-loathing relatives and friends, was relegated to live the rest of her days needlessly fearing and loathing them.

Public schools incorporate no specific lesson plans for students about snakes from appropriately trained and qualified teachers to help safeguard them come the inevitable day they are exposed to erroneous, often fear-inducing information. As a result, the students are largely destined to be placed in a position whereby their breadth of knowledge is based solely on the passed down misperceptions and destructive attitudes of ophidiophobic mothers, ophidiocidal fathers or other acquaintances, who were, themselves, victims of miseducation.

I first met Kathy and Jim Bricker in 2008. They were in attendance at a *Michigan Snakes Alive* program I was contracted to present at Whitefish Point, near Paradise in the Upper Peninsula. (On the last Saturday each April, Michigan Audubon Society hosts “Spring Fling” - two days of guided birding and wildlife presentations for the public at this premier location for viewing migratory raptors, waterfowl and other birds.) At its conclusion the Brickers approached to comment on how impressed they were with the presentation, especially given that the species I showed and discussed were the very ones people would encounter in their own yards and neighborhoods. They mentioned that they were active members of Straits Area Audubon Society based in Cheboygan and were also in charge of programming for monthly meetings. They wanted to explore the possibility of my not just giving the presentation for their local club, but, if they were able to raise enough funds, arrange for me to present in some local schools, as well.

You see, the Brickers were *already* very in tune with education about snakes through their own endeavors. They happened to own an amiable, seventeen-foot Reticulated Python that they would regularly haul into schools for hands-on opportunities for students of all ages. “Pivot” was a well-known and loved member of the Cheboygan community!

A year had passed before I heard from Kathy again. She emailed to tell me to not give up on them. She was steadily accumulating donations from area businesses and individuals specifically earmarked for snakes presentations at a future date. True to her word we got the call early in 2011. That spring Kathy and Jim hosted the snakes and me in their home for two nights. I gave a *Michigan Snakes Alive* presentation to a huge crowd at Cheboygan Public Library then gave another nine presentations to fifth graders at three schools on the topic. We haven’t missed a year since, and the tremendous feedback from citizens of all ages in Northern Michigan is helping to spread the program to other communities and schools. Some, in fact, are now taking the initiative to secure their own funding to have our program back each year for the next crop of fifth grade students. As the years progressed Kathy and Jim scheduled me for three, then four, then five consecutive days of programming for fifth graders at northern schools... and demand continues to rise. For the 2018-19 school year we’ve officially gained so many interested schools that I am making the trip over *two* separate weeks.



Aware of the importance of the up-close, hands-on portion of each program, when scheduling presentations with any school Kathy insists that audience sizes be kept to less than thirty students. The small-audience experience thus allows for the last ten minutes of the hour to be “free-handling” time! Students, many of which were unsure or fearful of the snakes at the start, are encouraged to leave their seats and “mingle” with Michigan-native snakes of all sizes. Small groups form around the room as they take turns holding, passing and even “wearing” many of the snakes they got to see and learn about. Comments, often spoken with an air of incredulity range from *This is the first time I’ve held a snake!* to *I used to be so scared of them!*

Many of the students express disappointment when it is time to leave. I shout my standard parting message as they noisily file out of the room. “Be nice to snakes! Don’t tolerate anyone killing a snake!”

After the first scheduled week of presentations this October, Kathy and Jim drafted and distributed a multiple-page *SAAS Report to Donors* complete with photos and captions as well as snippets of information shared during the presentations. Here is an abridged version:

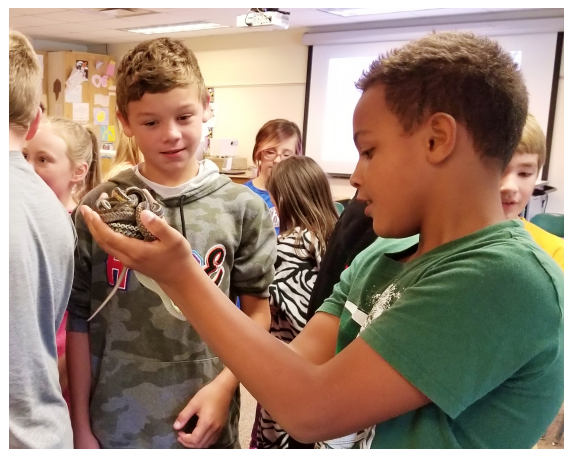
*“Free-handling time at the end of the hour!” This announcement always excites attendees at **Snakes Alive!** programs. Straits Area Audubon Society volunteers enjoy watching children and adults shed their biases and fears when they learn about snakes. Jim McGrath of Nature Discovery comforts people. “It’s not your fault. Someone filled your head with wrong information, and you’ve never heard the truth.” For the ninth year in a row SAAS has brought the truth about Michigan snakes to Cheboygan County. To meet increased demand from area schools, SAAS will hire Jim twice this school year. His first visit, October 2-5, was enabled primarily by a grant from Presque Isle Electric & Gas Cooperative’s Communities First Fund. Awakon Federal Credit Union, Cheboygan School District, and private donors Amanda Skiera and Kathy Swanson also provided funds.*

Over four days Jim interacted with 477 people, including 334 children and 143 adults. The program came to fourteen classrooms at seven schools: Cheboygan M.S., Cornerstone Christian, Inland Lakes, Onaway, Rogers City, Vanderbilt and Wolverine. An evening community program was held at Indian River Library.

***Snakes Alive!** teaches better understanding and appreciation of diversity of life and encourages people to protect wild places. Jim begins each classroom experience by “going big” right away. From its carrying case, a pillow slip, he removes Michigan’s largest, the black rat snake. Students watch it curl comfortably around his neck. He explains that a snake accustomed to being handled would win “the most gentle animal” contest hand-down. Volunteers then let students touch and pet snakes as Jim tells about the nine species he brought.*

Jim says snakes that are not afraid move slowly, in a calm and exploratory fashion. “But if a large mammal like us looms over a wild snake, it could get eaten. Its reaction should be called defensive, not aggressive. I’ve never seen a snake chase anyone.”

More than hearing about or touching snakes, actually holding them excites children the most. As one mother reflected, “It’s like the difference between touching a baby’s tiny hand and holding it unassisted to experience one-on-one its weight and wonder.” SAAS experts oversee the free-handling period to ensure that snakes are not dropped or harmed.



The next series of presentations, mostly in Emmet County, is planned for February, 2019, conditional on raising funds to pay for it. Inquiries and offers may be directed to Jim Bricker, Youth Outreach Coordinator for SAAS, at pivot777777@hotmail.com or at 231-627-4830.

The mission of Straits Area Audubon Society is to educate the community, including its children, about conservation and enjoyment of the natural world with emphasis on the local natural communities of wildlife. Visit www.straitsareaaudubon.com for newsletters and more information.

Kathy recently pondered, wouldn’t it be great if this program became as popular in your area and around the state as it is here? We think so much alike...

Ambassadors to “the cause” with the energy of the Brickers are hard to find, but in the spirit of this festive time of year, rather than buying the gift of yet another consumer good, as the barrage of advertisements command, consider a donation to SAAS to help them continue expanding this program, or to a local school, perhaps as a gift to a child or grandchild (Printed certificates available... See page 6.). The gift not only circumvents materialism-run-amok, but bestows an impactful and lifelong-lasting gift that is needed in our rapidly-degrading environment (Alarmingly so... See page 6.) now, more than ever.

- Jim McGrath

***Making the Ultimate
Winter
Bird Feeding
Station
for Maximum Birds
& Enjoyment
Sunday, December 9
1 to 5pm; \$5/person***



What's the secret to attracting the greatest abundance and variety of birds to the feeders outside your winter window? Think of them as customers at a "bird restaurant" – with you as the manager! When you consider the preferred menu of your potential guests in addition to the most comfortable "seating" and overall ambiance, you'll turn your feeding station into the squawk of the town.



At 2pm sit-in on this lively 90-minute Powerpoint presentation traversing all aspects of attracting winter birds through the correct management of your own upscale avian eatery. Does offering a mix of seeds attract the most birds? Not necessarily... How does hanging only one style of feeder limit the number of visiting birds? Participants will view beautiful color images while learning the preferences and behaviors of familiar year-round backyard residents as well as a host of songbirds from the far north that would like to adopt your yard as their winter getaway. Seeds, feeders and other considerations discussed in the presentation will be available for inspection during and after the program.

Come early or stay late to visit, and interact with our huge zoo of Michigan reptiles & amphibians. Take in the action at bird feeders right outside our windows, too. Knowledgeable staff is on hand throughout the day to help visitors of all ages make the most of their visit.

Catch Jim on Coffee Break December 13

Jim is scheduled to appear on Thursday, December 13 at 9:15am, discussing the annual Christmas Bird Count and other seasonal 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.



Michigan Owls & Owling

Wednesday, December 26; 7-9pm

The evening begins with a Powerpoint presentation over hot beverages and a snack. We'll present *Michigan Owls Up Close*, featuring all 10 species found in the state, covering identification, vocalizations, behavior and ecology of various species. Weather-permitting, we will then go out and attempt to "call one in" with audio recordings. Dress warmly, and don't forget your binoculars and camera! Advance registration required. Maximum 10 participants, so sign up early. Not

recommended for small children. Fee: \$12/person. Do you have a small group of family/friends that would like to get together for an owling night? Contact us to make your own special appointment!



Lansing Area

Winter Youth Birding Day

Wednesday, January 2 8am to 3pm

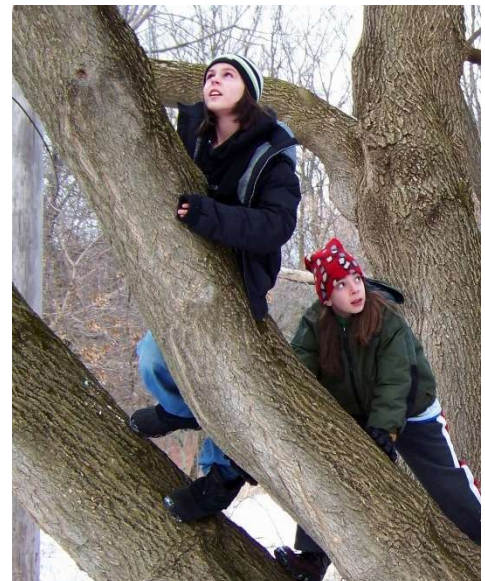
For 4th grade students and older. Join Jim for a whirlwind day of winter birding in a number of Lansing area locations. Potter Park and the river trail skirting the Red Cedar are noteworthy for waterfowl, eagles and many other birds. We'll check out the Peregrine Falcons that nest and roost at the Eckert powerplant across from Moore's Park, plus other birds and locations based on what has been reported earlier in the week by local birders. Each student will be provided with a Michigan Birds checklist to keep a tally of species through the day. We may be able to arrange for your student to be dropped right at your door at day's end! Pack a bag lunch, binoculars, and dress for the weather. Enrollment limited to 5. COST: \$75/student. Contact us to register.

New Year Day Camps

Thursday & Friday, January 3 & 4

9am-3pm

Recommended for students, K & older. Enroll for either or both days of hands-on Michigan nature. Participants will interact with over 100 animals within our Michigan reptiles & amphibians zoo! Identify, handle and feed many of our snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders. We'll watch and identify birds at our busy feeders and check them off on personal checklists. Lots of time outside and on the trails, as well! A photo of your student in action will be emailed to you. Hot lunch, hot chocolate and snacks provided. \$65/student/day. Advance enrollment required.



Give a natural gift this season - GIFT CERTIFICATE or FROGS CD



“VISIT NATURE DISCOVERY” GIFT CERTIFICATE:

For adults, families. Base price is \$25, or only \$5/person/hr. Upon payment we will email you a certificate to print and present to the recipient. Gift certificates also available for Owling Nights, Birthday Parties, Day Camps, and other ND functions., or in step with our opening essay the gift of a Michigan Snakes or other presentation for the school classroom of a child or grandchild.

“FROGS OF THE GREAT LAKES REGION” CD:

Instructional and Environmental listening. \$15. Contact us for details.

Cheers to Patagonia, But Too Little Too Late?

Yes, apparently it is possible after all for a corporation to have an environmental and social conscience. Cheers to Patagonia! Jeers to the profit mongers who lack one.

<https://www.newsweek.com/patagonia-tax-cut-donate-environment-1240130>

My brother Mike McGrath of Bartlett, Illinois shared this somber report in *The New York Times*. “Must” reading in our hope that awareness spurs action.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/27/magazine/insect-apocalypse.html>

-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

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

350.org

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