

THIS ISSUE

Gift Ideas

Guided Birding by Appointment

Visit Us by Appointment

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Thank You Donors

Give a Crap; I Am Greta

A Dose of Wild Birds Spells COVID-Blues Relief



The Red-breasted Nuthatch is a common visitor from the North at feeders this winter. Photo by Barb Meining.

Each of Michigan's four seasons induces varied reactions and feelings from those who live, work, and play in it. Everybody has their favorite, of course, but we all know which one, hands down, would receive the least favorable votes, and it is not hard to generate a list of reasons why. Combine this with the forecasted COVID infection rates and associated social restriction guidelines and we're likely in for the bleakest winter of discontent most of us have ever experienced... But it doesn't have to be. I strongly suggest a dose of wild birds every day to keep the COVID blues at bay. *Warning: Some may be susceptible to addiction!*

TO THE BIRD FEEDER...

To stave a bad case of the pandemic-winter blahs the nature doctor minimally prescribes daily bird feeder-watching. In last month's issue I argued for constructing and managing your own winter bird feeding station in close proximity to a large window. A commitment to diligence requires that you venture out each morning to restock it. In fact, feeder-filling is my very first routine each winter morning often before



Evening Grosbeak. Photo by Barb Meining.

daylight has broken. Only minutes after I awaken, still in my pajamas, I step out the back door with full cups of seed and expose my senses to the wintry weather. It's invigorating! On less windy mornings as I move from feeder to feeder I listen through the stillness and often hear the low, distant hoots of a great horned owl pair settling in for the day.

Identify and keep track of who visits your feeders. Like "locals" at the corner bar where everybody knows your name, you'll soon come to know the daily regulars. Sporadically, winter vacationers from a northern biome, like the Pine Siskin, the Common Redpoll, or – an especially rare migrant at area feeders this year – the Evening Grosbeak, mingle among the usual crowd. Suspense and drama are provided courtesy of a bird-hunting Cooper's hawk. It will strike like lightning outside the window at any hour. At a well-stocked feeding station in a rural or semi-rural location you should easily tally twenty to thirty species by the end of February.

You can enhance the purpose of your endeavor for science's sake by tabulating the species and numbers you see. Register to participate in Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's Feederwatch program at <https://feederwatch.org/>, and/or collect data for Kalamazoo Nature Center's statewide winter bird feeder survey. Email coordinator John Brenneman at jbrenneman@naturecenter.org to inquire about participation details. Especially this winter, this is a terrific hands-on/computer-off project for kids who are currently schooling from home.

...AND BEYOND

Granted, far more birds can be found here between late spring and early autumn, but backyard feeder birds are just the tip of winter's avian iceberg. Winter birding *beyond* the backyard offers quite an array of



At Lake Lansing you might see the world's largest gull, the Great Black-backed. Photo by Greg Smith.

species that have little interest in such tame habitat, and a significant number of them can be found at this latitude at no other time of the year. No matter where you live in the state there are natural areas within a short drive that harbor migrants who have winged here all the way from Canada's expansive boreal forests, or perhaps even all the way from the fringes of the Arctic Circle.

For instance, as long as water remains open, destinations like Lake Lansing, Park Lake, and portions of the Red Cedar and Grand rivers offer an array of overwintering waterfowl that breed far to our north, including geese, ducks and gulls of a greater variety than you'd ever see in the warmer months. There are good spots right in Lansing where sightings of Bald Eagles (i.e., Potter Park) or Peregrine Falcons (Moore's Park) are practically automatic. In fact, habitat adjacent to any open waterway is good for winter bird activity, in general.

Visit open field or agricultural habitats for flocks of Horned Larks and Snow Buntings recently-arrived from the tundra. When snow accumulates on the ground they often gravitate to the plowed roads allowing up-close viewing right out a car window. A flurry of a hundred or more of these subtly beautiful songbirds is not uncommon. Flocks can be found drifting about the fields of MSU's farmlands throughout every winter. The backroads east and west of U.S. 127 around Maple River State Game Area north of St. Johns offer good viewing from the car window or the roadside without having to worry about traffic. Slowly cruising these roads in winter yields still other visitors from the North that are rarely seen in most areas, like a Rough-legged Hawk, Northern Shrike, and more.

Wondering where a Snowy Owl has been seen lately? You can keep track of standout bird species that others are encountering in Mid-Michigan and where they are being found by signing on to the midmichiganbirders email listserve. To join, just drop an email to the listserve coordinator, Bruce Cohen at brcohen50@gmail.com.



Snow Buntings.

Photo by Greg Smith.

You can consider joining either or both of two Michigan-specific Facebook groups to learn not only where noteworthy birds are being spotted, but to view often gorgeous photos of them, too. If a particular post prompts you to drive to the location to see the bird before it is gone, be warned. You may be slipping down the addiction slope (Hey, a Glossy Ibis that inexplicably blew all the way up here from Florida was spotted this week at Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge near Saginaw. It may still be there, let's go!).

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/michlisters>

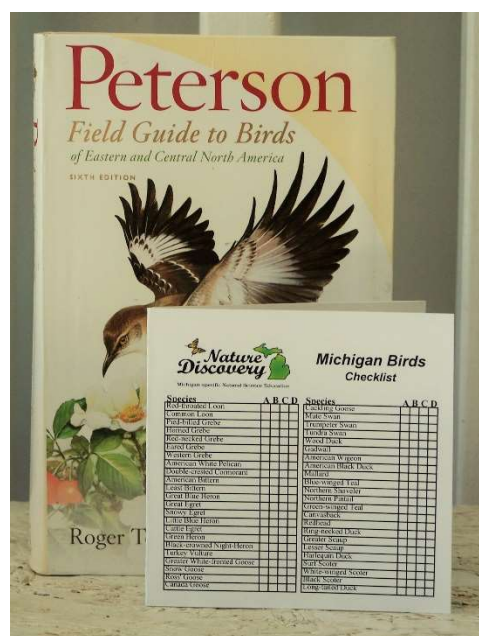
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/michiganbirdwatching/>

Subscribe to eBird (<https://ebird.org/>) to access still more posts of unusual bird sightings within the state and beyond. I've already discussed the feeder-watching projects, but through eBird the citizen science is boosted to a whole new level. Navigate the site's tools and options to keep your own online life list, year list, state list, etc. The lists you submit of birds encountered on any outing are not only stored in your own personal archive. They are also entered into eBird's cumulative database to help ornithologists track and better understand the range, migration patterns and seasonal abundance of every species in any area where birders submit what they encounter.

IMMERSION

For the beginner, trying to identify birds in the environment at a distance with nothing more than a field guide to help you can be a frustratingly slow and disheartening process. Instead, by tagging along with a serious, seasoned birder your progress is guaranteed to be much more efficient, fun and exciting.

I've taught and led groups of beginning birders of all ages through Nature Discovery offerings for over three decades. I've watched many newbies develop into accomplished birders, some of whom continue to participate in our outings, locally and beyond. Each participant receives one of our Michigan Birds checklists to keep track of species encountered on any excursion. Naturally, a good set of binoculars is critical, as well; 8x42 is the most commonly used and recommended. Compact binoculars may be convenient to tote, but they are not meant for birding and are difficult to train on the subject in the field.



Birding with young children is challenging since they have not yet developed either the dexterity to operate the binoculars nor the quiet patience required to have success. However, by about the age of eight or nine, with practice and an appropriately-sized pair to fit small hands many young birders can master the manipulation required to aim and focus on a bird. Even when they are unsuccessful at this, I have found that children are generally quite focused on keeping their own checklist. They enjoy finding the bird among hundreds on the list (with my verbal direction) then checking the appropriate box. I will quickly find and show them the bird's illustration in my guide or on my phone app. Kids who bring home a checklist marked with the day's birds can later be encouraged to locate these species in a bird field guide and perhaps sketch some of their favorites.

Of course, through this odd winter, birding with a sizeable group is not advisable, and traveling together in a vehicle, even less so. Therefore, by appointment nearly any day an interested adult,

couple, family or small learning pod of students can meet me at a local natural area of choice for guided birding. The river trail through Potter Park is a good location to start. Check out more details on Page 5.

HAPPY RETURNS

In finishing, I thought it would be impactful for readers to peruse direct impressions from a few of our past and current participants as to the quality of their experiences. I was confident the comments would be positive since all have returned for subsequent outings. However, I must admit that I am somewhat abashed by the lavish praise...

I've known Will Gold since his parents enrolled him in his first summer nature camp with us way back in his early elementary years. Needless to say, the birding camps lit a fire. Since then, and over more than two decades to date Will has participated in dozens of Nature Discovery birding excursions and continues to be a regular participant in outings for adults. Will wrote: *Birding through Nature Discovery as a kid has given me a passion and hobby that I will enjoy until the day I die.*

Eric Petrie has come to many of our monthly Sunday programs for years, but it wasn't until the onset of the pandemic after reading about it in our newsletter that he began to make appointments to join me on personalized guided birding walks around our 3.4 mile country block. Eric wrote: *I loved walking with Jim early in the morning once a week looking for birds. He charges next to nothing for his amazing skills, which include: the ability to be quiet, watch and listen; the ability to know where to look to find the birds moving through the landscape; an excellent sense of what he perceives, by sight and sound, as it speeds by or sits motionless on some treetop branch; and above all, an ability to hear small differences in a bird melody or squawk that identify a species. I especially wanted to learn to bird by ear, and was amazed by how well Jim could teach me what to listen for, and imitate bird calls in a whistle or a word phrase. And, if all you really want is to have a pleasant conversation about nature while walking through the countryside, Jim has no lack of stories to keep you entertained."*

Mary Minor and Richard Brooks were first invited to participate early this summer in a guided birding walk with me that was arranged for a small group of adults at Riverbend Natural Area in Holt. Then they



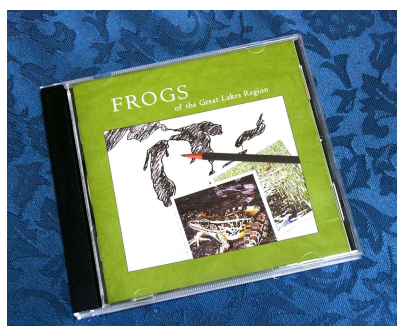
Participants Jan Heminger and Judy Marr view waterfowl through our spotting scope.

participated a few weeks later at a follow-up outing. Mary wrote: *Listening to Jim's bird calls is definitely a bonus when going on walks. His enthusiasm, extensive knowledge of bird species, calls, habitats, migratory patterns and life cycle are extraordinary! Coupled with his storytelling and humor, a bird walk with Jim leaves you enthused to learn more and more, but more importantly to be aware and mindful of the abundance of bird species right in our own backyards. Richard added this: Jim is a true naturalist. He brings into view not only birds but other wildlife in the environment. A whole picture is what you get: the inner-connectedness of birds in their environment, which is slowly disappearing because of man's policies toward the wilderness.*

I first met Peggy Cheney many years ago while leading a birding outing for Capital Area Audubon Society. Since then, Peg has participated in a number of our birding excursions through Nature Discovery, including individual walks during the pandemic. Peg wrote: *Jim is so full of nature information, it just spills out of him - from bird habits, to identifying trees by bark, to what to look for in habitats you are in, etc. It is hard to stump him. Also, he is very responsive to your special interests.*

A heartfelt thank you to each of the above commentators and to many more who appreciate and so overtly support our mission. We value it now more than ever!

- Jim McGrath



Give a natural gift this season -
"FROGS OF THE GREAT LAKES REGION" CD
Instructional and Environmental listening. \$15.

"NATURE DISCOVERY" GIFT CERTIFICATE:

A guided tour for an adult, adult couple, or family either in-person at our nature center or virtually! Base rate is \$25/hr. Upon payment we will email you a certificate to print and present to the recipient. Gift certificates are also available for outdoor guided functions for adults and families, i.e., guided birding at a local natural area, guided general nature walks, evening "owling," etc. Contact us for details and other ideas.

Nature Discovery

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517.655.5349 naturedisc87@gmail.com www.naturediscovery.net



Golden-crowned Kinglet. Photo by Greg Smith.

Personalized **GUIDED** **BIRDING** *by Appointment* *For Adults, Students, Families*

For individual adults, adult couples, families, and other small groups, and a great remedy for the COVID-winter blues! **Parents**, this is an excellent way to get your home-bound students out of the house and into the fresh winter air while providing a fun and educational opportunity that may very well bloom into a lifetime interest! **Adults/Retirees**, a first excursion might just hook you... You may find yourself propelled into an engaging hobby that you'll wish you had found years ago!

While fewer birds can be found in Michigan through the winter months than in other seasons there is quite a list of species that can *only* be found here now. In addition to our common non-migratory species a slew of migrant visitors from northern coniferous and tundra biomes appear in varied habitats, many of which are a short drive from home. It is also the time of year most likely to yield a "surprise" sighting – a vagrant species well outside of its normal range (i.e., a Glossy Ibis recently reported at Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge – a looong way from Florida).

We are now offering guided birding by appointment almost any day of the week. Jim will meet you at a local natural area of your or our choosing. The goal? To find and identify as many bird species as possible during our time together. Each participant will receive one of our Michigan Birds checklists to keep a running tab of species encountered. Some birds can be viewed even closer through our high-powered spotting scope.



Contact us today to arrange a day and location. We also have spare quality binoculars to lend. Suggested minimum donation: \$20/hr plus mileage stipend.

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Visit Our Nature Center by Appointment

***Suggested Minimum
Donation: \$5/person/hr***



The sky's the limit for natural science learning here – with a Michigan twist! Through the duration of pandemic restrictions individual adults, couples and individual 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 a welcome relief to a student’s screen-learning time! We will bring snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders out of tanks to interact with adults or students of any age or grade-level. Visitors are required to wear a mask during all indoor time.



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 frogs. 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, bugs, trees, vines, and invasive plants.

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 additional information or to make an appointment any day.

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***Visit Us
Virtually
By Appointment
Virtually Any Day!
Via Zoom or Facetime***



Arrange your own personalized tour!

Our busy little nature center is home to the state's largest zoo of Michigan-native reptiles and amphibians. Twenty-four tanks plus a pool on the floor hold nearly 100 individuals of 38 combined species of snakes, turtles, frogs, salamanders and lizards.

Your personal tour guide will take you tank to tank identifying, then giving viewers up-close looks at the creatures within while throwing in interesting and useful tidbits of information about each one and answering your questions along the way.



Nearly any of our cold-blooded menagerie can be taken out of tanks for even closer views on request. We can also feed them a wide range of foods, including crickets, worms, minnows and even frozen-thawed mice.

Base suggested minimum donation \$25/hr/household.

Ask about special arrangements for multiple-household sessions.

Contact us for further information or to schedule a date.

We are humbly thankful to our many supporters as we continue to navigate these challenging and difficult months, including contributions from the following donors over the past month...

*Anonymous Donor
Baumann Family
deBarbaro Family
Jan Heminger
Jon Kazsuk
Koorstra Family
Jane Sablich
Stanfield Family*



“Give a Crap” Over the Holidays... for the Earth

Looking for truly *practical* gifts to give this holiday season? Here’s an idea inspired by a gift from long time ND-supporter, Peg Cheney – a box of 48 toilet paper rolls from Who Gives a Crap (<https://us.whogivesacrap.org/>). Check out their site and you’ll understand why the Natural Resources Defense Council gives them an A-plus sustainability rating (<https://www.nrdc.org/experts/shelley-vinyard/issue-tissue-20>). View the graphic here to make sure your brand is not on their s*** list.

Speaking of giving a crap, the movie, *I Am Greta*, a documentary about the young climate change activist from Sweden, is now available on *Hulu*. We recommend it as essential viewing for those who recognize the science and seriousness of the climate crisis, for those who don’t, and as inspiration for the young people who are going to have to live with the future consequences of today’s gross ineptitude. However, after reading this *New York Times* interview I’m convinced that the chosen title of the documentary, in the first-person point of view, reflects a misplacement of the public’s attention that frustrates the teen subject. She says that “...by doing this film, they show



Are you sustainably wiping your bum? From <https://www.nrdc.org/experts/shelley-vinyard/issue-tissue-20>

how absurd this celebrity culture we live in is, that people are so obsessed about me as an individual and an activist rather than the climate itself. And also that all this responsibility falls on us children and instead of taking action themselves people applaud children. Children who don't even want to do these things but feel as if they have to because the people applauding aren't."

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/02/magazine/greta-thunberg-interview.html>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDdEWkA15Rg>

-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



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



RSPO.org



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