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An American Goldfinch feeds opposite one of many Pine Siskins, recently-arrived from more northerly latitudes. Although identical in size to the goldfinch the siskin is heavily streaked and has a much sharper bill.

“Siskinvasion” at the Finch Feeder

Move over, goldfinches. Like it or not, you’ve got company.

Witnessing the season to season and year to year variation of visitors outside your window is one of the many joys of feeding birds. When is this variation most notable? Not in the summer, as at first you might assume. Most songbirds that migrate to tropical or subtropical climes to survive do so because of their reliance on insect or invertebrate matter, rather than seed, as a food source. When they return to Michigan in the spring, they are not visiting bird feeders, but foraging among the local vegetation for small animal protein.

Our non-migratory permanent residents, like Northern Cardinals, Black-capped Chickadees, Tufted Titmice, White-breasted Nuthatches and Downy Woodpeckers, visit the feeders any time of year, but between fall and spring, a host of songbirds that breed to our north may make their way south to take up winter residence in our fields and yards. Juncos and tree sparrows are automatic at our feeders come November, but others are highly sporadic and almost unpredictable as to what winter, or when in that winter they may suddenly make a southward push. These include Pine Siskins, Common Redpolls, Purple Finches and Red-breasted Nuthatches, among others.

Again, one may assume that the severity of the winter or depth of snow up north plays a role in their winter movements, but it is way more about the week to week abundance or scarcity of the seeds on which they forage.

To wit, and once again, this has certainly (and unsettlingly) been one of the warmest winters on record. Despite the balminess, the past two weeks have seen a tremendous invasion of Pine Siskins to Lower Michigan bird feeders. The goldfinches are always quite common at our two thistle feeders, but suddenly they’ve been greatly outnumbered by swarms of Pine Siskins that were no where to be found a few weeks ago. One can only surmise that the seed sources on which they relied in Northern Michigan and throughout the Canadian Taiga have become severely depleted as the winter has progressed.



Siskins outnumber goldfinches at our feeders right now.

A cursory glance outside your window may lead you to assume all those small birds on the thistle perches are the same goldfinches that have been there every day of every week. The siskin is exactly the size of a goldfinch, but very streaky-brown, especially on the breast and belly. When it flies patches of yellow are exposed on its wings and tail, but when it is perched these patches are usually hidden.

Most likely, the siskins will remain until spring. Common Redpolls may begin to show up in the coming weeks if their northern seed supply dries up, too. The redpoll is streaky, but paler than the siskin. Look for a raspberry red cap and a black chin in addition to a rosy blush on the breasts of the males.

Our Sunday open hours fall on Valentine's Day this month. If you are able to attend be sure to spend time amidst our one-of-a-kind, interactive Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Zoo.

Make a special point to check out our beautiful yearling Blue Racer, too. We acquired this snake from Ludington State Park's MDNR Interpreter, Alan Wernette. When we exhibited and presented at the park over Labor Day weekend he showed it to us and said that someone had found it on their rural property and brought it to the park for him to identify. He kept it, realizing it might be something we could utilize in our educational program. In the Greater Lansing area this species is nearly extinct. It is holding on much better in rural areas on the west side of the Lower Peninsula.

The Blue Racer is our state's second largest snake. In every sense of the word this is the "wildest" snake found here, too. It appears far more sight-oriented than any other native snake and reacts strongly to movement. For instance, movement of a nearby large body will startle it into a sudden or panicked retreat. Movement of a small body may induce it to charge and seize it.

A racer is, indeed, the most "omnivorous" carnivore of any Michigan snake. A rat snake, fox snake or milk snake largely eats warm, furry or feathery prey and their nest contents. Our three species of garters eat worms or small amphibians. The Smooth Green Snake specializes on insects. The racer? All the above. In fact, it will also chase down and eat smaller snakes. In short, if the object moves and it is small enough to subdue, the racer will take it!



Note the brownish sheen to the yearling Blue Racer's color. Hatchlings are grayish brown and heavily-spotted. Over the following year the spots fade and the familiar blue hue slowly develops.

Over this winter ours is devouring large crickets. Not just any cricket we drop into it, though. If a cricket remains still or crawls about slowly in the tank, the little racer seems disinterested. If the cricket hops and scrambles about, the sudden movements induce the racer to pursue, snatch and swallow it.

More on this unique, fascinating and, wrongly-persecuted snake in an upcoming issue...

-Jim McGrath

Friday, February 12

Kensington Field Trip

9am to 3pm

For elementary students and older. Hand-feeding birds at this metropark, just east of Brighton, is the highlight of this field trip that begins and ends in Nature Discovery's classroom. We'll take pictures of all participants with bird-in-hand. Bring binoculars if you have them, dress warmly and pack a bag lunch for the road! Advance enrollment. FEE: \$60/student. After-care on request.



Open Hours

Sunday, February 14
1 to 5pm; \$5 admission

2pm Presentation

Birding by Ear ***Late Winter Edition***

The Tufted Titmouse and a dozen other winter resident songbirds ratchet up their breeding songs in February. Photo © Steve Sage



At 2pm, ***Birding by Ear – Late Winter Edition***, will be presented. Cued by our lengthening days, chickadees, titmice, cardinals and many other winter resident songbirds have ratched up the volume, intensity, and frequency of their breeding songs. Learning to identify birds by sight is a useful skill, however, when you are able to step outside and “bird by ear,” you graduate to a level of avian awareness that blows away identification by sight alone! February may be the best month to start. A manageable number of common species are singing their breeding songs now. As migrants return, the number of songs out your window increases steadily. By May, a boggling 40 or more may be heard on a country lot! Powerpoint slides and audio recordings are used to familiarize participants with who is calling now. At the presentation's conclusion we'll step outside to identify singers and elicit some responses with recordings. Bring your binoculars!

Don't forget! Our **Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Interactive Zoo** is open to all ages for visitation before, during and after the presentation.

***Do you have any old or burned-out Christmas lights? Don't just throw them out! Bring them when you visit. We'll be happy to send them off for proper recycling.

Michigan Wildlife Day Camp ***Mon & Tue, February 15 & 16*** ***9am to 3pm***

For students K & older. Join us for one or two days of in-your-face nature! Indoor activities include lots of interaction with our snakes, turtles, frogs, salamanders and lizards, as we handle, feed, and learn about them along the way. Keep your own bird checklist of species seen at the feeders and in the woods out back. We'll walk off-trail in search of a hidden insect that spends the winter in snowy fields (as long as a woodpecker doesn't find it!). Each student can take one home and watch for it to emerge from its hiding place in the spring. A hot lunch, snacks and plenty of hot chocolate are provided. Advance enrollment. FEE: \$55/student. Ask us about after-care.



Catch Our Exhibit at Donley's ***STEAM Night*** ***Wednesday, February 17*** ***6-7:30pm***

Open to the public! Interactive snakes, turtles, at our exhibit, plus so much more! Donley Elementary is located at 2961 Lake Lansing Road in East Lansing.



Then Catch Us on Coffee Break ***Thursday, February 18***

Jim is scheduled to appear on Thursday, February 18 at 9:30am, discussing and playing recordings of bird songs heard outside in late winter. 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 Facebook.





Trumpeter Swan pair.

Photo © Steve Sage.

Lake Erie Birding Day Saturday, February 20 7am to 5pm

Join an intimately-sized group of adults on this full-day, late-winter excursion. The winter landscapes of our Great Lakes shorelines are strong magnets to a surprising array of Canadian species that call Lower Michigan “South.” Lake Erie is no exception. All three species of swans found in Michigan can often be seen together here over the winter. In addition to viewing a host of diving ducks and other fowl on the open water through our spotting scope, we’ll explore adjacent habitats for roosting northern migrant owls, such as Long-eared and Saw-whet. Many other birds are always in store, too. Stops include Lake Erie Metropark, Point Mouillee State Game Area and other locations along the way dependent on latest internet reports. A Michigan Birds checklist is provided to allow participants to keep track of species encountered throughout the day. Depart 7am; return about 5pm.

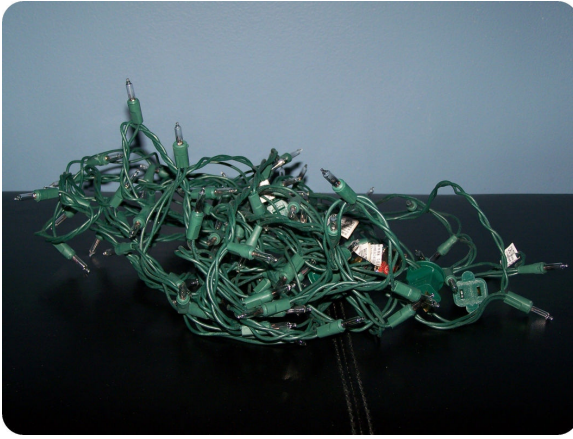
FEE: \$65, includes all transportation to and from Nature Discovery. Advance registration required.

The Carbon Footprint

Anyone who takes the planet-altering effects of climate change seriously should be willing to take responsibility for their personal carbon waste by making a concerted, ongoing effort to shrink their carbon footprint. This needs to become as automatically embraced as we deal with our solid waste - not just used then dropped where you stand (Nobody likes a litterbug.), but put into a proper waste receptacle or, better yet, recycling bin. Go online to find countless means to minimize carbon emissions in your day to day life. BTW, how can you take the biggest chunk out of your personal footprint? Replacing incandescents with CFLs is nice but the energy and emissions saved is a pittance compared to other personal sources. Transportation (the vehicle you drive, and how many miles) and Housing (square footage of your residence, plus the energy required to heat/cool it) are a typical American’s largest contributing factors. Make changes to these to see a significant drop in your emissions output. The money saved is added incentive!

We’ve adopted the emissions reduction goal as our own personal challenge and are locked into it on a daily basis. For instance if Carol and I have separate, staggered appointments in the Greater Lansing area on a particular day, we’ll combine it as one trip in the Prius. While one of us is dropped at the appointment site the other either runs necessary local errands or goes to the nearest coffee shop to do office work. By cutting two trips to one we nearly halve our already low gas consumption. Plus, the change of venue from the usual home office is always refreshing.

Additionally, weather-permitting between spring and fall, we bike the five miles into Williamston to run an errand or to stop at a restaurant rather than drive. Exercise, fresh air and only an extra 45 minutes makes it a win-win every time.



We have several strands of non-functioning Christmas lights stuck in a box in our basement. We couldn't just toss them in the garbage. There had to be a way to recycle them. A quick search online produced a solution. There are a number of lighting stores around Michigan that accept these, but I didn't find any that were local. Rather than a quick drop-off I would need to box them and pay the postage to get them to a distant destination.

However, I did notice that Home Depot and Lowe's advertised offers limited to early December whereby old/non-working lights could be brought into the store for recycling. In exchange you would receive a discount

coupon toward the purchase of new energy-efficient LED lights. I called Home Depot to see if they would accept old lights any other time of year. They would not, but the Delta Township Lowe's said they would. Just bring them to the service desk.

Do you have any old Christmas lights you've been wanting to dispose of in a responsible manner? We'd be happy to take them in for you. If you attend one of our open Sundays (February 14 this month) or swing by for a special appointment, just leave them with us. We won't charge for the service, but any small donation is always welcome!

-JM

LCC-GATE Youth Classes Start February 27

Once again, Carol will be teaching 5-week Saturday classes at Lansing Community College, East Lansing Campus for gifted and talented students. The classes run from February 27 to March 26.

SCIENCE with EXPERIMENTS – ADVANCED: 9am to 12pm for Grades 4-5.

CREEPY CRAWLIES: 1-4pm for Grades 2-3. (This one includes a special field trip to Nature Discovery!)

Contact Carol for more information or visit lcc.edu/seriousfun to enroll.

Become a fan of ***Nature Discovery*** on Facebook!



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