



## ***THIS ISSUE***

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## ***It's the "Biggest Little" Nature Center in Michigan***

The juxtaposition of adjectives in the title may be paradoxical, but given the genesis then evolution into what exists today, the modifiers totally fit this unique facility attached to our home north of Williamston. Wow, there is a lot going on here!

A "conventional" nature center is most often funded, operated and staffed by a municipality, a county, the state, or perhaps by a non-profit group, but Nature Discovery dwells in the rarified position of operating as a proprietorship; that is, no government or grant monies directly contributed to the construction of this modest attachment to our country home, nor contribute to the day-to-day maintenance, operations, staffing and programming here. The funding comes directly from our pockets and from income earned in a field (ask any degreed nature center employee) which is notorious for barely livable wages and seasonal instability. Yeah, no one enters this field with the expectation of earning big bucks.

### **GENESIS & EVOLUTION**

Freshly graduated from MSU in the summer of '87 and again in '88, I attained permission to organize and operate a small summer day camp on campus out of a lab in the Fisheries & Wildlife Department in the Natural Resources Building. Over the following few years I operated summer day camps at Kinawa Middle School through Okemos Community Education and then at the historic village for Meridian Township Parks & Recreation (years prior to the opening of Harris Nature Center).

In the early '90s, in a space that connected our house to the garage, a friend and I built the maiden version of a private facility. Covering only about 160 square feet we merely called it a classroom, but we now had a designated roof over our heads to independently operate day camps for kids and to accommodate a

relatively small collection (from today's perspective) of aquariums which housed perhaps fifteen combined species of Michigan-native snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders (Our oldest of four kids, Glen - now 33 - has memories from his toddler years, prior to the construction of the classroom, when these animals resided in aquariums within our house. They were kept on several stands in a small room adjacent to our dining room that was not much larger than a closet.).

In these early years it bears mentioning that other income sources were already in place. Carol worked a career as an analytical chemist for a business in Howell while I maintained a part time job clerking at a Wild Birds Unlimited store in Okemos. I finally summoned the nerve to break ties with this supplemental income in the spring of '95 to dedicate full attention to the growing zoo and a growing clientele that was demanding increasing amounts of my time.



In the summer of '99 we built an extension onto the classroom which made it about one-third larger. This allowed for bigger audiences and space for more state-native herps which we were now becoming known for. Later that year Carol left her chemist job to join me in what had officially become a fully-fledged family business. We've been living almost solely on income generated from functions and contracts as Nature Discovery ever since.

As the number of aquariums and pools of Michigan herps continued to expand, the floor space available for visitors and other functions was steadily shrinking, so in 2007 we

added onto the classroom yet again by another fifty percent in the form of a five-step lower level. By then the collection had blossomed - with over forty species and nearly one hundred individual animals - into the largest zoo of Michigan-native reptiles and amphibians found in the entire state.

## ALWAYS OPEN?

Our unprecedented arrangement yields another ostensible paradox of statements: 1) We have no open hours, yet... 2) We're *always* open.

Through three decades we have scheduled and operated day camps over the summers, over spring breaks, and occasionally on school holidays. We have also hosted school classrooms, scout groups, birthday parties and other organized groups in field trip formats here. However, the bulk of our income has always been derived *on the road*, away from the nature center in the form of lessons, presentations, exhibits, interpretive outdoor experiences and guided birding trips at an array of locations locally and throughout the state. Since the day-to-day schedule of these appointed jobs has always varied from one week to the next, the mere consideration of maintaining a weekly schedule of open hours at the center was out of the question - an unfortunate set of circumstances



*Our male Bull Frog anticipates a worm-drop.*





*Seven turtles of six Michigan species stack in a pile to nap under the basking light.*

amphibians zoo. On our website, in our newsletters and on our Facebook page we welcomed masked adults, couples and families virtually *any day, any time*, by appointment. As winter advanced into spring and summer we were also increasingly able to shift the visitors' activities into the fresh air outside.

In lieu of a standard admission fee a "minimum donation" of only \$5 per person per hour (cheaper than a trip to the movies or to a fast food restaurant) was requested so as to make a visit affordable to as many people as possible. Visitors were then welcome to donate a larger amount based on their budget and on their perceived quality of the visit. Thankfully, a large portion did, sometimes handsomely so!

The idea was a smashing success. In the first spring and summer, adult and family visitations averaged a dozen appointments a week, sometimes exceeding twenty. However, as expected, when restrictions loosened and in-person school resumed these figures declined, but to this day a steady level of visitations by appointment persists.



*The state's (and our continent's) largest moth and butterfly: the Cecropia and the Giant Swallowtail. Beyond the MI herp zoo there is so much more Michigan wildlife to discover. We can help!*

since we knew we could provide so much to see, learn about, and do for any individuals or families who wished to pay a visit as "walk-ins."

Then the pandemic bombshell dropped and widespread social fallout ensued. Businesses that relied on gatherings of human bodies scrambled to reinvent themselves or face shutdown. For Nature Discovery nearly all the educational aspects mentioned above had vanished.

Our work slate wiped clean, we suddenly had become available like never before. For lack of absolutely anything else going on we began to promote safe, private visits to our nature center and to the Michigan reptiles and



*Michigan's largest snake, a gentle, 6-foot Black Rat Snake, will cling to your arm just as tightly as if it were perched on a high tree limb.*

Over the past year many (but, by far, not all) of the pre-pandemic jobs that we had relied on have incrementally resumed, but now that "visits by appointment" have become established in our repertoire we have chosen to continue offering the format indefinitely into the future.

If you haven't yet, no matter your age, I encourage you to make an appointment today based on *your* availability – day or evening, weekday or weekend. Find out first-hand all that an intimate, personalized, guided experience through "the biggest little nature center in Michigan" has to offer throughout the seasons. Besides, the breadth of the "natural Michigan" experience is so vast that multiple visits are not just required but *desired* by any visitor who is personally curious, and rightly concerned about the precarious fate of the wild diversity that surrounds us.

*-Jim McGrath*

# Nature Discovery

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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! Individual adults, couples, individual families and small groups 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.” In fact, the many unique, hands-on experiences here make the experience *better* than a trip to a typical zoo! 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.

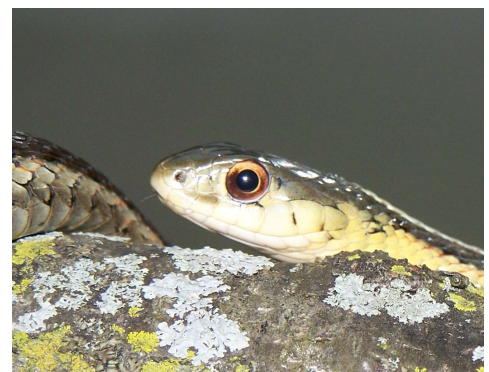
Identify and feed “the grand slam of Michigan turtles” - all ten species native to our state! Meet, pet and feed lettuce to “Milberta”, our always hungry Red-footed tortoise.

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 or live minnows. 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, trees, vines, and invasive plants.

Ask about arranging weekly or monthly visits, or about custom visits and natural science lessons to supplement your student's interests and grade-specific science requirements. We have a wealth of suggestions!

Contact us for more info or to make an appointment.





# *“Unadvertised” Guided Birding Opportunities*



Did you know that in addition to offerings posted in our newsletters, on relatively short notice we also schedule and lead more impromptu guided birding outings for adults? These may range from a few hours at a local natural area; to see an unusual bird that has popped up in the vicinity; to a full day or even an overnight birding adventure to farther reaches of the state.

If you'd like to be alerted by email or text when such trips arise just ask to be put on our birding participant contact list. We're likely to have one this month!

## *Around the State in February*

Thursday, February 24: 5:30-7:30pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Ralya Elem., Haslett.

Sunday, February 27: 2-3:30pm. MI Snakes Presentation; Seven Ponds Nature Center, Dryden.

*An appreciative “thank you” to our many past and present supporters, including the following donors over the past month.*

*Jan Heminger  
Pabst Family  
Andrea Worful*





## ***Thank you, Cedar Creek Vets!***

**Photo: Dr. Wayne Beasley inspects a young Wood Turtle patient from Nature Discovery in January.**

**We're grateful that Cedar Creek Veterinary Clinic supports Nature Discovery's educational mission, so much as to offer pro bono health care for nearly 100 animals in our educational menagerie!**

**Did you know that Cedar Creek Vet is known throughout the state and beyond for their specialty in reptile and bird care?**

**Visit <https://cedarcreekvet.com/> for more information.**

## ***“Less” Gives Us More***

In the December issue we recommended the book, *The Day the World Stops Shopping*, by J.B. McKinnon. Rampant consumerism is responsible for a sizeable slab of human-generated fossil fuel emissions, the most egregious form of which is demonstrated in the lifestyle of today's U.S. citizen. Quite frankly, the world has no hope of tackling the climate change dilemma without a widespread movement to curb our propensity to buy, buy, buy. McKinnon offers a well-researched look at what that effort might look like - and it is more do-able and with less discomfort than you might think. A shortcut to reading the book is to watch any of a number of video interviews with the author available online. Here is an hour-long program from GBH Forum Network.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QLt5qhQauRk>

Transitioning from global to personal well-being...

For centuries philosophers around the world have preached that the path to spiritual satisfaction, happiness, and peace involves detachment from material wants. In this recent column in *The Atlantic* by Arthur C. Brooks, entitled *How to Want Less*, he gives a present-day perspective on how and why it is in your best interest to strive toward the goal.

[https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/03/why-we-are-never-satisfied-happiness/621304/?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=atlantic-daily-newsletter&utm\\_content=20220208&utm\\_term=The%20Atlantic%20Daily](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/03/why-we-are-never-satisfied-happiness/621304/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=atlantic-daily-newsletter&utm_content=20220208&utm_term=The%20Atlantic%20Daily)

-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.*



Less Beef = Less CO<sub>2</sub>  
Cowspiracy.com

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



Worldwarzero.com



RSPO.org



Insideclimatenews.org

Become a fan of *Nature Discovery* on Facebook!

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