



THIS ISSUE

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A New Year's Resolution for 'Life'

Why We Slept With Our Shoes On

It was quite early on the morning of August 6, 2008. I may have been the first patient of the day at the ready-care in Okemos. A uniformed young woman showed me to the examining room and said the doctor would be in shortly. I sat in a chair then carefully took off one shoe. I removed my sock and gingerly pulled off the band-aid that was wrapped around my tender big toe.

A minute later the doctor entered. As he lifted my foot and closely eyeballed the toe he asked me to explain what happened. Not a minute after I launched into the circumstance that led to the injury he interrupted me and held up a finger.

"Could you wait a second? Do you mind if someone else joins us?" I shrugged and said that was fine. He opened the door, stuck his head out and called another staff person's name. "You've gotta hear this." Another man, then the woman who had initially guided me to the room slipped in. "Okay, go ahead," he said with an oddly enthusiastic smile.

At about 2 a.m. we had been sleeping soundly in bed when I was jolted into wakefulness by a sudden, sharp pinch to my big toe.

"Ah! Something just bit me!" I sat upright - as did Carol when I yelled - and reflexively swung my leg over the side while reaching for the bedside lamp switch. I knew there would be blood flow even before the light allowed me to see what I had felt. Sure enough, as if from a faucet tap not entirely closed, blood dripped and spotted the hardwood floor at such a rate that a small puddle began to form within seconds.

When I announced that my toe was bleeding Carol jumped out of bed, ran into the bathroom and returned with a wad of toilet paper. I engulfed the toe in my tissue fist and squeezed firmly to stave the flow. "What was it, a bat?" she asked while her eyes scanned the room. A bat had found its way into our old country house more than once before.

"No, it's definitely bigger," I replied, then pulled the red-soaked tissue away briefly - time enough before the blood resumed flowing for us to see that there were two separate small but deep cuts in the flesh on opposite sides of the toe about halfway up the nail. Something had gotten its whole mouth around it.

We shifted and sat next to each other on the end of the bed, looking from side to side around the room while I continued clasping my toe in the toilet paper. What was it, and was it still in the room? The bedroom door was open. Carol kneeled and nervously peered under the bed. Nothing.

She had just sat next to me again when... there came a brief but distinct rustle from behind her dresser. In unison, our heads pivoted toward the sound. A pregnant second of silence broke like glass when Carol shrieked. An object catapulted from behind the dresser. Her feet sprung off the floor and onto the bed as the animal – only slightly smaller than a football but with a lengthy hairless tail - bounded past us; a *very* large rat.

In a panicked state, it scampered across the open patch of floor next to the bed, but its nails could not get a grip on the smooth finished surface of the hardwood. We watched with mouths agape. As if in slow motion, its feet scrambled for traction as it slid sideways across the glossy slats. Regaining its foothold, it flashed to the open doorway, made a sharp right turn and disappeared into the dim hallway.

We looked at each other and exclaimed in chorus, “Holy shit!”

A gander at the configuration of the bed covers led us to deduce how the rat had come to join us in bed. As we had slept, tossed and turned, a significant swath of the sheet and comforter had slid down the back edge of the mattress and bunched on the floor. For a nimble rodent with claws it looked like a piece of cake to climb.

As soon as the rat vanished into the hall our concern shifted to the kids, who at the time ranged in age between tweens and teens. (We opted to not awaken them but would fill them in if they awoke on their own... which, true to the slumbering habits of most kids their age, they didn't.) Two open bedroom doors were to the left of our doorway. To the right, where the rat had turned, it could have either run into the open door of another bedroom or down the stairs back to the first floor from which it had presumably come.

Carol turned left into the hall and closed the bedroom doors. I wrapped fresh toilet paper around my toe, slipped on my shoes, and ran downstairs turning on every light switch I passed while keeping eyes and ears open for movement. I grabbed a flashlight then went into the garage and pulled an iron out of my golf bag. I needed to check the bedroom where one of my sons continued to sleep.

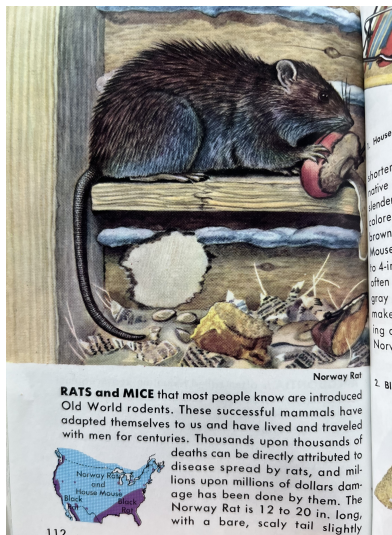
We simultaneously decided that Carol was to make a wee-hour run to Meijer in order to buy possibly every rat trap they had in stock. She was on her way within a few minutes.

To the sound of my youngest son's steady breaths, I crept through his room with the flashlight in one hand and the golf club in the other, tensed with adrenaline. I moved the beam around the floor while listening acutely for the slightest suspicious rustle. I kneeled and swept the light under the bed, then thoroughly checked his closet. Fairly confident now that the rat had gone downstairs after all, I exited the room and closed the door behind me. All rooms upstairs were closed and secured.

Downstairs I moved systematically from room to room and eventually made my way out to the bi-level space of the nature center where a couple dozen tanks of our native reptiles and amphibians were aligned on stands and along counter tops. As soon as the lights went on my eyes auto-scanned the room for movement. When I looked down and across the counter space in the lower level my eye caught one then a second telltale incongruity.



A pint-capacity canister of dried turtle food sticks had been left open on the counter. It now lay sideways, the sticks spilled across the counter in front of a tank of small turtles. A significant portion had spilled over the edge and littered the tile floor beneath.



A page from The Golden Guide to Mammals of North America.

On the opposite counter a plastic cup of water had been toppled, as well. Light reflected off a puddle on the counter and on the floor beneath the cup. It was then that I remembered. Earlier that evening I had taken five frozen fuzzy-sized mice, each about an inch and a half in length, out of the freezer to feed our juvenile rat snakes. I had placed them in the cup of hot water to thaw and had forgotten to return to feed the snakes before I went to bed. They were now gone.

A sink is situated in middle of the counter along the west wall. I had installed a sliding door in the fascia below the counter at opposite ends, each of which opened to reveal about ten square feet of storage space inside. One of these doors was gaped open plenty wide for a rat to enter. A rectangular hole that once held a small window also exists on the back inner stone wall of this cabinet. From inside, a rat would be able to move freely into or out of the basement through the opening.

Having checked the entire house and now the rest of the nature center's space I approached the cabinet with a distinct and uneasy feeling that this is where the rat had gone. I slid the door wider so I could point the flashlight beam sideways several feet in either direction into the storage space. Nerves on edge, I had to push my head almost completely into the opening in order to see around objects and into every corner.

I felt some relief to see no movement, however, when the light fell on one far corner it illuminated another sign of its movement. A bunch of turtle food sticks were pushed and piled into it. Adorning the top of the cache lay two of the missing fuzzy mice. A gnawed, headless portion of a third lay at the base of the pile.

Stairs descend under the original part of the house - built in the late 1880s - to a dusty basement surrounded by foundation walls made of field stone. Our furnace, water heater, extra aquariums of various sizes, and boxes of seasonally stored stuff comprised the gamut of materials kept and accessed here. The switch operates two bare bulbs at opposite ends of the basement; the light from which, however, leaves a number of corners and nooks in permanent dimness. I went down, hackles raised, and looked around with the aid of the flashlight plus the golf club, if needed, for any sign of the rat. After several minutes of searching I found nothing but felt that it must surely be hiding down there somewhere.

An hour after she had left, Carol was back with four big snap traps and a large flat glue trap that was designed to mire something as big as a rat. I set one snap trap on each end of the storage space under the nature center sink, the other two along far walls of the basement, and the glue trap on the floor along the wall directly beneath the old window hole.

Traps in place, I got online to research any potential harm that could come from a wild rat bite. I was relieved to find that rabies was so remote in rats that it was not even worth considering. *Sanitize the wound, be vigilant for signs of infection, and obtain a tetanus shot if you had not had one recently.* I hadn't received one in many years.

There was no going back to sleep with the rat still at large, so, with the traps set, I showered, dressed and planned on being at the ready-care the moment it opened. In addition to the tetanus shot, I wanted the peace of mind in having a medical professional's assessment.

By the time I arrived home the kids were awake, caught up to speed by their mother regarding the ‘situation,’ and appropriately unnerved. We checked the traps throughout the day but they were untouched. This didn’t surprise me since rats are largely nocturnal. I imagined the bloodthirsty varmint, curled up safely in some inaccessible recess of the basement while digesting a bellyful of turtle sticks and mouse meat, resting up for Act II come nightfall.

How did the rat get in the house in the first place? We were quite certain how. When we are home during the warmer months of the year (and since we work out of our home, someone is here almost all the time) we leave the back door of the nature center propped open. Over the course of the day we are in and out the door so often during day camps held here, and to maintain the yard, vegetable garden, and plethora of living creatures inside and out, we save ourselves many dozens of opening and closing episodes by just leaving it open all the time. We close it around sunset after we bring the turtles and tortoises in for the night, just as the mosquitoes are starting to become active.

We reside in farm country. Farmers provide large quantities of fodder to livestock that, unfortunately, has the potential to draw rats. Individuals disperse like other wild creatures to search for new horizons with ample food and shelter. We surmised that around sunset the night before this vagabond found our open back door and furtively slipped inside before we got around to closing it.

Sure enough, early the second night things began to happen. Just before sunset, I was outside when Carol heard one of the traps snap in the cabinet, and let me know. I slid the cabinet door aside to reveal the sprung trap lying upside down – empty. The chunk of ham I had used as bait was gone, too. I baited and reset it then checked the other traps. They had not been touched.

I made the rounds of the trap line again before the family retired for the night. The one in the cabinet had been sprung and the bait stolen again. Was this animal lucky, smart, or just too big for the trap? One of my sons joined me to check the basement traps. As we descended, my gaze was drawn to the spot along the near wall where I had laid the glue trap. It was gone.

We slinked through the basement with flashlights and golf clubs to look for the displaced trap or maybe a very sticky and surly rat. We searched the basement end to end once, then again and were incredulous that such a large object could have seemingly vanished into thin air. At this point my perspective toward the rat began to take a spooky turn. Like Ahab’s Moby Dick this uninvited guest was beginning to display qualities that were eerily tending toward supernatural.



Everyone confirmed that they would be sleeping with bedroom doors closed that night. That’s when my daughter, twelve years old at the time, dangled the possibility that if the rat is so good at staying out of sight, who was to say that it hadn’t snuck back upstairs and into one of the bedrooms when no one was looking?

“I don’t know about you, but I’m wearing my shoes to bed tonight,” she declared. Her older brothers quickly followed with *me toos*. Carol and I refrained from committing one way or the other.

A short while later I crawled into bed wearing socks. I figured the band-aid on my toe was less likely to loosen and come off overnight that way, but a minute later when Carol exited the bathroom I looked over and burst into laughter. Her gym shoes were on. She maneuvered the sheet over them with feigned difficulty. We were still giggling at the absurdity after the lights were out.

About fifteen minutes later I could tell she was asleep but I was nowhere near it. I kept thinking about the rat, now surely active again with free rein through the dark house. With the contracting sounds of an old, cooling house after a warm day and four other people sleeping in nearby rooms, there are going to be noises – slight, but evident to an attentive ear in the darkness. On any other night these sounds would be dismissed without a thought, but for me, not tonight.

Did that tiny bump just come from the hall or from the closet? Were the sheets sliding down and touching the floor on any side of the bed? I turned on the lamp, got up and checked the bed's perimeter to make sure. But what if they got tossed off after we were both asleep? I shook my head in exasperation and reached for my sneakers. Carol woke up as I was bent over tying them.

She rose on an elbow squinting from the light. "What are you doing?" I turned and raised a shoe-clad foot off the floor. We both started giggling again. She was right. It was hard to get a pair of feet with shoes on them under the covers.

Upon awakening at first light I went downstairs to check the snap traps. I was surprised to find all four undisturbed, the bait still in place. I had cleaned up the rat's cache in the cabinet the day before. I could not find even the slightest trace of rat activity. The following day and the next night also produced neither rat, nor any scintilla of its presence. However, we didn't blame the kids for keeping their shoes on the next night. In fact, a few more nights would pass before shoeless sleeping was unanimous again under our roof.



The Norway Rat is one of 28 Michigan mammal skulls on hand at our center.

So, this rat enters our home then heralds its arrival with bloodshed. It gives us a mere passing glimpse as if to prove that our home's haunting menace was indeed a three-dimensional being. Then it evaporates, to exist in our minds the rest of its brief time among us like a mischievous ghost. It spooks and toys with us while still managing to evade our vision. It tosses our household routine on its ear. Then it is gone.

While some of the above statement is true from our point of view, a scientist would likely not label this an objective account. The pragmatic wildlife biologist in me can't help but attempt to view the episode otherwise - detached from human stigma and more from a rodent's perspective:

A rat doesn't grow this large without being opportunistic, resourceful and keenly evasive when necessary. This particularly seasoned drifter came from a barnyard of plenty (spilled grain, chicken scratch, cow manure, etc.). It wandered into our living space, found and sampled some of the cuisine (turtle sticks, mouse meat, human toe), but once they were denied to it there was just not enough fuel available here to sustain a rat's metabolism for long. The glue trap, while unsuccessful in capturing this especially large and strong individual, probably made quite an unpleasant mess of its precious coat, and may have bolstered its ultimate assessment of these premises: 'unratworthy.' So it left.

Afterword: If you're wondering if we ever did find the glue trap, the answer is yes. A few years later I was moving some stacked boxes of stuff in the basement and discovered it wedged upright between two of them. I can picture the rat dragging the trap across the floor, then squeezing into this tight space where it became lodged, allowing the rat to pull itself free. In the meantime, in this cramped and upright position the trap continued to fulfill its purpose on the resident mice. A few tiny, dry skeletons surrounded by tufts of hair were embedded into the grimy surface.

-Jim McGrath

Nature Discovery

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A spotting scope view of a Merlin, a small uncommon falcon that may spend the winter around Potter Park.

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

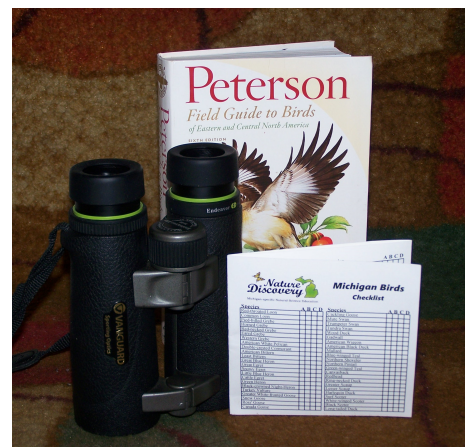
For individual adults, adult couples, families, and other small groups. **Parents**, get your kids out of the house and into the fresh winter air while providing a fun and educational opportunity that may very well bloom into a lifetime interest! **Adults/Retirees**, a first excursion might just hook 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. There are specific destinations to visit in the Lansing area to get great looks at Bald Eagles, Peregrine Falcons, Snowy Owls and other iconic birds.

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. Ask about a special OWLING excursion either before sunrise or after sunset.

Contact us today to arrange a day and location. We also have spare quality binoculars to lend.

Pricing is determined by duration and distance to the destination.



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Our Northern Leopard Frog eyeballs the camera.

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**Suggested Minimum
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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.” The personal, hands-on experiences we offer here are unmatched by any “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.

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. Hold or “wear” a gentle 6-foot Black Rat Snake – the largest in the state!

Forty species of 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 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.



Kids love hand-feeding lettuce to “Milberta,” our Red-footed tortoise.

*Wishing a Happy New Year to all our valued supporters,
including a special “thank you” to these
most recent donors...*



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Chris Paige * Marge Pestka * Shafer Family * Dave Shuyter * Stepping Stones Montessori*

A New Year's Resolution for 'Life': Consume Less

In the past 50 years, the abundance of global wildlife has declined 69 percent according to the World Wildlife Fund, and there is no indication that it is slowing. Humanity's burgeoning population, combined with our technological and cultural self-involvement is exterminating life on the planet. This is not an 'alarmist' position. The evidence is undeniable.

A segment in the January 1 airing of the TV news magazine, *Sixty Minutes*, focused on this current mass extinction event, driven by too many people consuming too much stuff.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/earth-mass-extinction-60-minutes-2023-01-01/>

This may be the most important New Year's resolution you can make. Resolve now to consciously consume less in 2023 and beyond. Here's a healthy alternative to the benefit of all life, including your own: Exploration of and immersion in the wondrous, precious and diverse living world around you.

It is our mission to aid you in this pursuit. Start by simply paying a visit to our 'big, little' nature center. Schedule a personal local guided birding outing, yes, even in winter. You won't be disappointed.

-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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