



This Varied Thrush photographed by David Pavlik was too good to relegate to the second page. Better than a cover photo of a sick bird. Read on for more about both.

THIS ISSUE

Around Mid Mich in March

Coffee Break, March 10

Sunday, March 13 / Providing for Bluebirds

Maple River Birding Day, March 23

Summer Day Camp Preview

Exxon: World Champ...

Winter Feeding Elicits Drama & Surprise

I often refer to the pursuit of feeding birds as one of the simple pleasures of life. Indeed, for me it almost bestows some therapeutic quality. The absolute best viewing is during, or immediately after the most inclement winter weather. During Winter Storm #1 last week I mentioned to Carol that, between our two feeding stations – one outside our dining room window and the other outside our nature center window – there were easily over a hundred birds present. Only an estimation of their number is possible, though, because most don't remain still for more than a few seconds at a time. The fluttering dynamics of multiples of color coming and going makes a firm count impossible, and, like the mesmerizing effect of flickering flames within a campfire or hearth, the eye is drawn to the action. I can't imagine growing tired of the show.

Prolonged viewing is rewarded with drama and surprise. For instance, inevitably, there is an explosion of wings as a Cooper's Hawk bursts onto the scene. Ninety percent of the time it comes up empty and moves on. Minutes later the hordes are back as if nothing had happened.

While I was filling feeders early that morning chickadees and finches gathered with anticipation in surrounding trees, but at a safe distance. However, a lone goldfinch fluttered, hovered unsteadily, then landed only a few feet from me. Why so bold? At this close perspective I saw the "problem" immediately. Its eyes were swollen nearly completely shut – a symptom of avian conjunctivitis. This bird was visually-impaired enough that it no longer recognized me for the potentially-dangerous large mammal that I was. It came in to feed while the others stayed back and waited. As in humans, conjunctivitis, in itself, is not lethal to birds, but the resulting limitation in a bird's vision makes it easy pickings for any potential predator. If a predator doesn't find it, especially in these conditions, starvation and resultant freezing would doom it before the day was out.

When I came into the house and looked out the dining room window I did not see the afflicted bird, but the feeders and ground were soon covered by the healthy



ones. I relocated it outside the nature center window. There it sat, isolated forlornly atop the deep snow in the middle of the yard well away from the feeders. It fluttered upward in a confused spiral then plopped back into the snow. I stepped out the door, and the healthy birds scattered, but this bird suddenly flew up and toward the feeding area. It crash-landed on the recently-shoveled patio only several feet from me. I took some photos of it before it fluttered in its visual fog around the corner of the house and toward the other feeders.



Eyes swollen nearly completely shut, this goldfinch's visual handicap made it ripe for predatory picking.

The crows rarely come to the feeders situated so closely to our windows. They are not comfortable in such close proximity to us. Their “feeder” is the compost heap behind our vegetable garden, well away from the house. The daily organic waste dumped on the pile keeps them coming and going with almost as much regularity as the smaller birds to our feeders.

About an hour had passed when Carol glanced out the dining room window and noticed. There a crow sat, sunk into the deepening snow only about twenty feet behind the feeding station. It was intently focused on something, probing its beak out of my line of vision, looking up and around, then back at it. I had a feeling as to what it was. Finally, it secured the contents in its beak and took off toward the back of our property. Through the blowing snow I couldn't tell for sure, but the mass in its beak was definitely goldfinch-sized. On subsequent trips into the blizzard to refill feeders or to shovel, the sick bird did not reappear.

The weekend before, Betsy and Nick Burwell, who live in a rural setting west of Bellevue, emailed me a photo of a strange bird under their feeders that they had never seen before. The photo taken through the window was blurry, but showed the telltale field marks well enough. A Varied Thrush?!

The bird's size and shape is, appropriately, similar to those of our most familiar thrush, the American Robin, but it's supposed to be on the West Coast! The Varied Thrush's normal range spans a corridor from Alaska to Southern California. More so than most other migrants, scattered individuals of this species wander eastward out of their normal range with some regularity. On average, a few are reported in the Great Lakes area every winter, but many years pass between sightings in the Mid-Michigan area.

Betsy sent me better photos after last week's snow storm. For lack of anywhere else to find food, this bird was coming to the feeding station as regularly as the usual residents. With her permission, my friend, David Pavlik, and I drove down on Friday to see if we could get a look at the thrush. Standing back from the feeding area with binoculars poised, a forty-minute wait paid off. The bird flew in from the woods, but was obviously much more nervous about our presence than the resident birds. It flitted back and forth between treetops surrounding the house and driveway a good ten times before finally feeling comfortable enough to join the other birds. After several minutes of great viewing, and allowing decent photo ops for David, the bird flew back over the treetops and out of sight.

I mentioned to Betsy that, with her permission, many birders would love a chance to view this bird. I told her about an area Yahoo group called Midmichiganbirders, where local birders post their avian discoveries. She allowed me to post it. Last weekend Betsy and Nick became birding celebrities as many people who saw the post contacted her for permission to try to see the thrush.

Unfortunately the weekend also brought unseasonably warm weather and disappointment for those who visited. With 40s on Saturday and 50s on Sunday, the thrush didn't make a single appearance. This was

not very surprising, because, changes in weather are notorious for prompting migratory birds to move. If the Varied Thrush is still around this latest storm should bring it back to the Burwells' feeder. But, nearly as likely, this bird may now have joined one of the scads of overwintering robin flocks this year, perhaps at this moment feeding in a crabapple tree hundreds of miles from Bellevue, Michigan.

Are you interested in joining the Midmichiganbirders group? Go to www.capitalareaaudubon.org and click on the "Listservs" link.

-Jim McGrath

Around Mid Mich in March

- ❖ **Friday, March 18:** 6-8pm. *MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Beagle Elem, Grand Ledge.*
- ❖ 6:30-8pm. *MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Hiawatha Elem, Okemos.*
- ❖ **Thursday, March 24:** 6-7:30pm. *MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Ralya Elementary, Haslett.*
- ❖ 6:30-8pm. *MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Whitehills Elementary, E. Lansing.*
- ❖ **Tuesday, March 29:** 6:30-8pm. *MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Kinawa 5-6 School, Okemos.*
- ❖ **Wednesday, March 30:** 5:30-7:30pm. *MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Lansing Charter Academy.*



Catch Nature Discovery on Coffee Break Thursday, March 10

Carol is scheduled to appear on WLNZ's *Coffee Break* show Thursday, March 10 at 9:45am, discussing our Sunday program and other 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.

We'll post a reminder on our Facebook fan page.



Open Hours

***Sunday, March 13,
1 to 5 pm; \$5 Admission***

2pm Presentation

***Providing
for Bluebirds
and other Cavity-nesting Songbirds***

Photo © Steve Sage

Bluebirds, chickadees, titmice and nuthatches begin searching for, and claiming nesting cavities throughout the month of March. Put a box up this month, and be amazed at how quickly birds begin to inspect it. At 2pm, we'll feature ***Providing for Bluebirds & Other Cavity-nesters***, a Powerpoint presentation featuring the array of "secondary" cavity-nesters - birds which, unlike woodpeckers, cannot excavate their own cavity, but must find an existing one. We'll also cover the life histories of two alien cavity-nesting birds, the house sparrow and European starling, which routinely destroy eggs, nestlings, and even kill adult birds in their drive to reproduce. We'll cover the best ways to deter them, and in so doing, maximize the nesting success of your backyard bluebirds and others. After the presentation we'll spend time viewing boxes in the yard, walk the trail and identify birds by sight and sound. Don't forget binoculars!

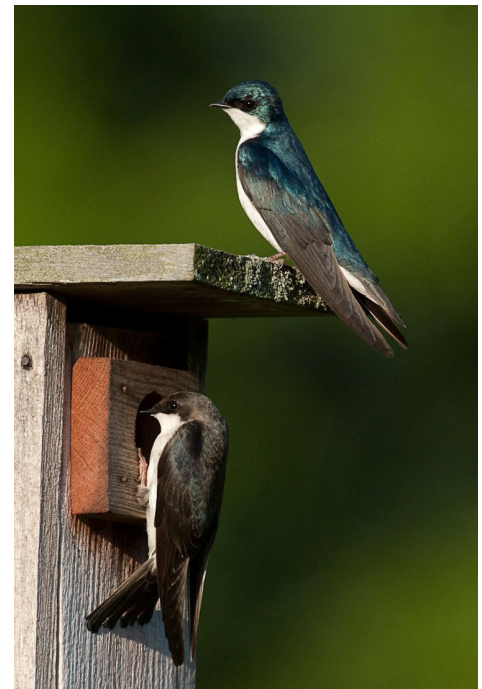
We'll have a limited number of bluebird nesting boxes for sale (\$17). We will also demonstrate a highly effective removable nest box trap accessory, available for sale (\$10). If you have a persistent house sparrow that has claimed a box in your yard, this will help you catch it. Feel free to contact us in advance to reserve a box or a trap.

With the aid of our staff, visit our highly interactive Michigan reptiles & amphibians zoo. Hold a snake, feed some turtles, drop a cricket to a frog. Enjoy the action at our bird feeders or ask for your own personalized guided walk on the trail.

Need help erecting a box in your yard? One of our staff can dig a hole, sink a post and install one for a reasonable fee. Contact us!

If you place a box on in an open area and it hasn't been claimed by April, a pair of Tree Swallows may take up residence.

Photo © Steve Sage



“Welcome Spring” Maple River Birding Day

*Wednesday, March 23
6am to 2pm*



Northern Pintail

Photo © Steve Sage

Join an intimate guided trip for adults in our minivan to Maple River State Game Area north of St. Johns, followed by a stop at Park Lake on the way back to check out migrant waterfowl through our spotting scope. Tundra Swans stop at Maple River wetlands in late March along with up to 20 species of other waterfowl. Jim knows where active Great Horned Owl nests are located, as well as Bald Eagle nests. We will stop on roadsides to view them up-close through our spotting scope. As many as 50 other species are in store, too. Participants will be given bird checklists to keep track of the day's finds. Feel free to pack any food/drink you like to consume on the road through the morning.

Enrollment is limited to five. Advance registration required. FEE: \$50, includes all transportation to and from Nature Discovery. Arrangements may also be made to pick up /drop off at your door or another convenient location.

2016 Summer Day Camp Preview

Wow, there is a glut of organized things for children to do over the summer these days! Therefore, beginning this year, we are highlighting any of our unique summer weeks as “Not Just Another Day Camp.” Each week's roster will be strictly limited to only **6 special participants** - specifically targeting **children who demonstrate a strong interest in learning about the natural world**. Below is a *tentative* schedule. More detailed information for each offered week will appear on the website later in March. However, enrollment is open from now until the rosters are full. Feel free to contact us with specific questions any time.

Full day (FD) camps run from 9am to 3pm (Birding, 8-2). Half day (HD) camps, 9am to Noon. The fee for full day camps is \$240 (\$120 non-refundable deposit). Half day camps, \$125 (\$60 non-refundable deposit). Do not send a check prior to phone or email communication with us. Availability of an opening for your child must first be confirmed.



SUMMER 2016 Tentative Schedule of Weeks

- June 13-16: Birds & Birding (FD - 10 yrs & older)
- June 20-23: Nature Discovery (FD – 7 to 9 yrs)
- July 11-14: Reptiles & Amphibians (FD - 10 yrs & older)
- July 18-21: Budding Naturalists (HD – 5 to 6 yrs)
- July 25-28: Nature Discovery (FD – 7 to 9 yrs)
- Aug 1-4: Reptiles & Amphibians (FD - 10 yrs & older)
- Aug 8-11: Budding Naturalists (HD – 5 to 6 yrs)
- Aug 22-25: Insect Collecting (FD - 10 yrs & older)

Exxon: World Champ of Corporate Greed

Check out Bill McKibben's lengthy February 18 column, *It's Not Just What Exxon Did, but What It's Doing*, in *TomDispatch*, an online blog by writer/editor Tom Engelhardt that is supported by The Nation Institute (www.nationinstitute.org), a nonprofit media center dedicated to strengthening the independent press and advancing social justice and civil rights: http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/176105/tomgram%3A_bill_mckibben%2C_it%27s_not_just_what_exxon_did%2C_it%27s_what_it%27s_doing/

McKibben often touches on the subject matter of two books that I've read and recommended in previous issues: The first is *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs The Climate*, by Naomi Klein. The second was made into a documentary movie, *Merchants of Doubt*, released last year and based on the book of the same name, by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway. We searched, but couldn't find a single theater in the Greater Lansing area that bothered offering it. However, it is now available through streaming services. Look it up, or we'd be more than happy to give you our copy of either book to peruse. Just contact us, and we'll make arrangements to get it to you.

Andrew Nowicki, one of our on-and-off staff at Nature Discovery, came across this article while researching for a presentation in one of his LCC classes. His topic concerned the environmental impacts from the production of palm oil, now found in so many of the products we consume. He stated that he's not sure he agrees with how everything is presented in the article, and I concur with him. For instance the article mentions a host of companies given high grades by the Union of Concerned Scientists for their commitment to acquiring palm oil from sustainable sources but doesn't bother to mention any of the companies, whose products our country is mass-consuming, that received poor grades from UCS. I, for one, want to know so I can make informed purchases (and boycotts!). Thanks, Andrew! <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/giving-up-palm-oil-might-actually-be-bad-environment-180958092/?no-ist>

We just became members of Union of Concerned Scientists! If you feel you can trust a scientist's rigorously peer-reviewed conclusions over a corporate-monied, political think tank's schtick you may want to give them a look: <http://www.ucsusa.org/>

-JM



Become a fan of *Nature Discovery* on Facebook!

NATURE DISCOVERY 5900 N. Williamston Road Williamston, MI 48895

(517) 655-5349 naturedisc87@gmail.com www.naturediscovery.net