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## The Pledge

“How often is the soul of man – especially in childhood – deprived because he is not allowed to come in contact with nature?” – *Maria Montessori*

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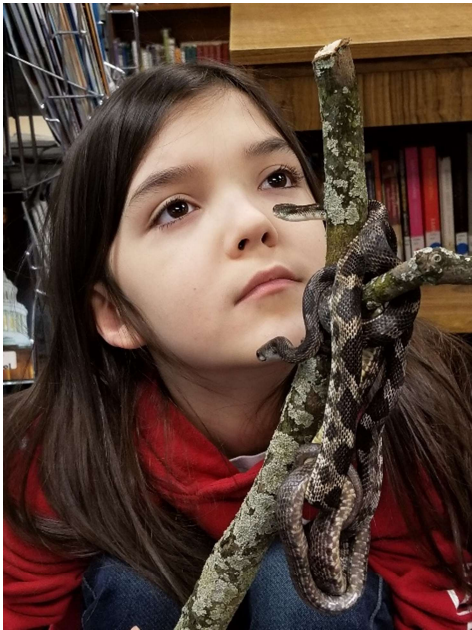
Yet another intensive week of *Michigan Snakes Alive* presentations in northern Michigan is history. From Tuesday through Friday last week, thanks to the coordinating and fundraising efforts of members of Straits Area Audubon Society (SAAS) and Petoskey Regional Audubon Society (PRAS) I delivered the program to seventeen school audiences - mostly to fifth graders, but also to preschool, to other elementary grades and even to some high school biology classes.

An hour isn't nearly enough time to properly educate anyone about snakes, but major shifts in attitude can definitely be made in this amount of time, and it is therefore far better than the amount most school children get. None. There is enough usable material whereby a school could (and should!) offer a *Michigan Snakes* science unit that extends for several weeks, along with introduction to some basic physiological adaptations of members of this reptilian order. The result? All levels of ophidiophobia would plummet toward zero and students would grow into adults who harbor an appreciative view of snakes and their role in a natural community. A positive view of snakes extrapolates into a more broad concern for the state of the environment that we share with them.

As it has been over the last nine years Kathy and Jim Bricker of SAAS hosted the snakes and me for two nights near Cheboygan (Thank you, Brickers!). However, since most of the presentations



this week were for more western schools in and around Petoskey, arrangements were made for us to spend the last two nights at the home of PRAS members, Doug and Martha Fuller, residing near Harbor Springs (Thank you, Fullers!). Doug and others also assisted during the presentations, walking among the student audiences with various species for up-close encounters.



After the last of five presentations on Thursday I commented to Doug that the assistants must grow weary by day's end of seeing and hearing the same presentation hour after hour. He replied to my pleasant surprise that, in fact, this wasn't the case at all. In the second, then third, fourth and fifth presentation he noted that I always offered several completely new factoids or situational accounts that I hadn't broached in the previous presentation.

I hardly notice the changes I incorporate from one presentation to the next unless someone else happens to mention it. (Kathy Bricker has made similar comments.) In retrospect I suppose the reflexive change-up naturally aids in keeping the delivery from drifting toward robotic as opposed to presenting the exact canned speech *ad nauseam*. The ever-varying content also speaks volumes about how much there is to teach and learn on the topic, all the more reason to turn the subject of Michigan Snakes into a regular unit at a specific grade level in all public schools.

At the conclusion of any snakes presentation I relay a parting *be nice to snakes* message as students exit the room. When *Michigan Snakes Alive* came to northern schools this past fall (See the opening column in our December 2018 newsletter: <http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Dec18.pdf>), however, I found myself ad-libbing this new twist to the wrap-up...

"We should come up with a pledge to be nice to snakes. Do you want to take a pledge?" Resounding approval. After all, most of them just finished handling, "wearing" and bonding with snakes of many species that they had regarded cautiously or even with loathing only an hour before. "Okay, everybody raise your right hand and repeat after me..." As we drove away from the school Kathy and Jim were in concurrence about the pledge. They loved it and suggested I incorporate it as a standard wrap-up to every session. This time around nearly every audience participated and recited it.

Here is the basic pledge, the beginning of which, as I first recited it, immediately brought to mind the scene in 1978's *Animal House* where the new frat members raise their right hands. Hyphens appear where the students repeat the word or phrase after me: "I, – state your name, – promise to never harm – or kill a snake. – I also promise – to never allow – anyone I am with – to harm – or kill a snake. – So – help – me – God."

As we were packing up at the end of one school day in Boyne City a teacher of students from one of the morning presentations popped into the room and handed me a stack of ruled papers. "Thank yous from my students," she said. "They've been buzzing about the snakes all day!"



That evening in the Fullers' living room I set aside my laptop and took the stack of papers out of my bag. After reading a few I could tell that the teacher must have written a loose template on the board for the students to follow. In the second paragraph each named their favorite part of the presentation. Many said



holding the snakes. Others named species they liked best like the huge black rat snake. Some said *that I'm not afraid of snakes anymore*. Still, surprisingly, many more mentioned our newest amendment, *taking the pledge*.

Through hour after presentation hour we witness the metamorphosis in their facial expressions, in their demeanors and comments. Guardedness thaws into comfort, fear into outright fondness. They ultimately promise with hands raised to never persecute or be passive witness to the persecution of a snake by another's hand, and it's easy to believe their resolve. We can see it in their eyes.

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"What the hand does the mind remembers." –*Maria Montessori*

–*Jim McGrath*



## ***Catch Nature Discovery on Coffee Break Friday, March 8***

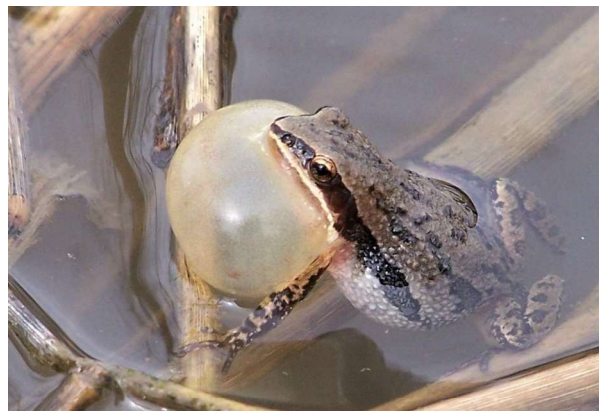
Jim is scheduled to appear on WLNZ's *Coffee Break* show Friday, March 8 at 9:15am, discussing frog song and other topics. The show airs weekdays from 9 to 10am on 89.7 FM. Listen live online at [lcc.edu/radio/onair/](http://lcc.edu/radio/onair/) or watch it live (or later in the day at 6pm) online at [lcc.edu/tv/watch](http://lcc.edu/tv/watch).

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

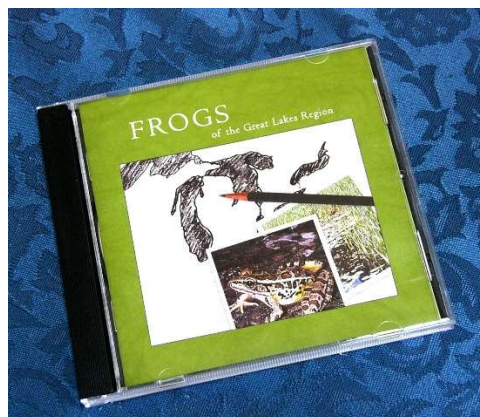
## **Open Hours**

***Sunday, March 17***

***Breeding Frogs  
of Mid-Michigan***



***Doors open from 1 to 5pm    Admission: \$5/person***



What frogs breed in your Mid-Michigan neighborhood? Through spring and early summer, you need not get your feet wet to find out. Michigan is home to 13 species of frogs and toads, eight of which can be found around the Greater Lansing area. Each can be identified by its specific breeding call, given only by the male. Each species also has its own breeding "window," the period of time when it is egg-laying on a particular wetland from early spring to mid-summer. At 2pm, sit-in on our presentation, *Breeding Frogs of Mid-Michigan* With the use of beautiful Powerpoint images, live specimens, and audio recordings from Nature Discovery's original CD, *Frogs of the Great Lakes Region*, immerse yourself "knee-deep" into the world of Mid-Michigan frogs.

\*\*\* Our *Frogs of the Great Lakes Region* CDs are normally priced at \$15. Participants in this program are invited to purchase one for only \$12.

At the presentation's conclusion, visitors can participate in a guided hike around our soon-to-thaw vernal pond just prior to the advent of frog-breeding and the awakening of invertebrate life.

There is more! 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. Knowledgeable staff is on hand to help visitors of all ages make the most of their time here.



*Weather-permitting, wood frogs should begin egg-laying in our vernal ponds by the end of the month.*

## ***Around the State in March***

- ❖ Thursday, March 6: 6:30-7:30pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Cornell Elem, Okemos.
- ❖ Thursday, March 14: 5:30-7pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; North Elem, Lansing.
- ❖ Wednesday, March 20: 5-7pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; N. Huron School, Kinde.
- ❖ Thursday, March 21: 6:30-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Marble Elem, E. Lans.
- ❖ Friday, March 22: 6-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Kinawa 5-6 School, Okemos.

## ***Early Spring Maple River Birding Day***

***Tuesday, March 26,  
6am to 1pm***



*Hooded Merganser.*

*Photo © Steve Sage*

Join a guided trip for adults to Maple River State Game Area north of St. Johns, followed by a stop at Park Lake to check out migrant waterfowl through our spotting scope. We will leave early enough to catch woodcocks performing aerial courtship displays at first light. Up to 20 species of waterfowl can be seen from dikes around the flooding. There is also a good chance to view active Great Horned Owl and Bald Eagle nests. We will stop on roadsides to view them up-close through our spotting scope. As many as 50 species are in store by day's end. Participants will be given 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.

FEE: \$55, includes all transportation. Enrollment is limited to five. Advance registration required. Arrangements may also be made to pick up /drop off at your door or another convenient location.



# *Spring Break Field Trip and Day Camp...*



## *Maple River Birding Field Trip*

**Monday, April 1, 9am-3pm.**

For 3<sup>rd</sup> grade & older.

Maple River State Game Area is peaking now with migratory ducks and a slew of other birds. See an active bald eagle nest, plus hawks and owls on nests, too. We'll hike dikes that surround the massive flooding, too. Students will tally up to 50 birds on personal checklists. Bring binoculars if you have them.

**COST: \$70.** Pack a bag lunch and water bottle, and be sure to dress for weather conditions. Advance registration required.

## *Spring Break Wildlife Day Camp*

**Wednesday & Thursday, April 3 & 4,  
9am-3pm.**

For K & older.

Students can sign-up for one or both days of nature and outdoor-oriented activities. Each day will encompass feeding, caring for, and handling our huge captive collection of Michigan snakes, turtles, frogs, salamanders and lizards. We will also offer a variety of engaging outside explorations and activities dependent on the weather, including bird-watching and exploration of our vernal pond now alive with breeding frogs and invertebrates galore. Weather-permitting, students who wish to wade into the pond can bring old shoes, socks and pants, a change of clothes, and a towel. Boots are NOT recommended for wading.

**Cost: \$65/day.** Hot lunch and snack are provided. Advance registration required.



## 2019 Summer Day Camps Sneak-Peek

Not Your Typical Day Camp! Each week's roster will be limited to only **6 special participants** - specifically targeting **children who demonstrate a strong interest in the natural world**.

Full-day (FD) camp fees are \$290. Half-days (HD) are \$150. An additional field trip fee may apply to some full-days camps. A 50% deposit is required to confirm a reservation.

June 10-13: Michigan Birds & Birding (FD - 10 yrs & older)

June 17-20: Budding Naturalists (HD – 5 to 6 yrs)

June 24-27: Nature Discovery (FD – 7 to 9 yrs)

August 5-8: MI Reptiles & Amphibians (FD – 10yrs & older)

Aug 12-15: Nature Discovery (FD – 7 to 9 yrs)

The full details, including Carol's LCC classes are posted on the website: <http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/summercamps.pdf>



## Environmentally-Responsible Wiping



From NRDC.org

healthy forests and a healthy planet already exist. Companies and consumers simply need to embrace them.” -NRDC reporters, Jennifer Skene & Shelly Vinyard

Here is a pdf of the much more detailed report. A lengthier list of tissue paper producers and their environmental grades can be found on page 6 of the report.

<https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/issues-tissue-how-americans-are-flushing-forests-down-the-toilet-report.pdf>

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Amid this weekend's two-hour marathon of stand-up schtick at CPAC, a mock fest broke out over proposals from the left to limit various sources of greenhouse gas emissions. Here is the narcissistic star of the show play-acting a gross misrepresentation of how wind power works: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j\\_mxOzo9CaI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_mxOzo9CaI)

When we saw it Carol and I blurted simultaneously, “Doesn’t he know how a battery works?” Does he really think the TV would go off every time the wind stops blowing? Since he is known to be averse to