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The First Robin of Spring? It's No Longer a Thing...

March 20 may be the Northern Hemisphere's first day of spring according to the earth's position as it orbits the sun, but in my mind – mostly due to the movements of the earliest migrant birds, March 1 is significant in its own right.

It is around this date that people who pay attention to the pulse of the natural world tend to see, hear and welcome the first feathered harbingers. True, on a given day the weather can often abruptly remind us that winter still has punches to throw, but these early birds are tough.

Migrating Common Grackles and Brown-headed Cowbirds unceremoniously crash bird feeding stations. Red-winged Blackbirds begin to speckle previously barren, snow-smattered cattail marshes. The prehistoric-sounding staccato bugles of Sandhill Crane pairs reverberate across vast farm fields as they vocally lay claim to breeding marshes. A newly-arrived streaky-breasted Song Sparrow perches atop a shrub within a roadside hedgerow staking a claim with its species-specific melody. All this supplements the abundant background tones of the non-migratory resident orchestra – Chickadees, Titmice, House Finches, Cardinals and others – as they, too, sing to the Photoperiodic March.

Historically, American Robins have fit right in with the early movers. Someone looking out their city or suburban window may not be in a position to notice the degree of avian sights and sounds prevalent across a rural landscape, but they take keen note of the reappearance in the yard of the familiar orange-breasted 'Lawn Thrush.' The human beholder brightly exclaims to acquaintances, *I saw my first Robin today!*

Twenty years ago I'm sure few would have predicted it, but for better or worse, those days are gone. It is not that Robins are notably declining, but that their migratory movements are being altered by ecosystem changes wrought by humanity's unchecked activities. In early March you can no longer say you saw your 'first' Robin if you've been seeing them - perhaps flocks of them - throughout the winter.

It's not the cold that necessitates southward movement in migratory birds, but the resultant unavailability of the foods certain species would need to sustain their inner furnaces through the winter months. That said, migration itself is a very energy-intensive and dangerous undertaking. If environmental conditions begin to change whereby specific foods, once lacking over the winter, steadily become more available, why bother migrating? This scenario appears to be playing out with increasing numbers of Robins.

All thrushes, including Robins and Bluebirds, consume small fruits and berries through all seasons. The imperative to locate them becomes amplified during times when the invertebrate animal foods they also eat become scarce due to low temperatures. When the weather takes a wintry turn they head to yards, parks and boulevard medians where varieties of ornamental crabapples, often planted in rows, still hold the past summer's produce. They can also seek the fruit of native shrubs (i.e., hawthorn, chokeberry and winterberry) the berries of which persist into the winter, but these are often sporadic or in widely-spaced natural habitats in Lower Michigan due to sprawling agricultural, residential and industrial land use.



A Cedar Waxwing on crabapple. Photo © Steve Sage.

The past couple of decades have witnessed the exponential expansion of alien invasive woody shrubs and vines that also bear small fruits. Each year untended woodlots and roadsides on both public and private properties are increasingly infested with Amur Honeysuckle (shrub), European Buckthorn (shrub),



In mid-December a Cedar Waxwing feeds on bountiful Amur Honeysuckle berries along Lansing's River Trail. Out of the frame hundreds more combined Waxwings and Robins swarm trailside honeysuckles for winter sustenance. +

Oriental Bittersweet (vine) or all three. Each produces scads of sweet berries intended to lure frugivorous birds. Thus, the seeds within can be transported then dropped in droppings further up the road or across the field. Indeed, these aliens are using many of our native songbirds as unwitting vectors (Alien European Starling and House Sparrows consume them, too.). This strategy to disperse, colonize and proliferate appears to be working to perfection, to the detriment of our woodland communities.

Many sections of Lansing's River Trail system as well as Meridian Township's Inter-Urban Pathway are lined with them; so are significant swaths of each of our local nature center grounds; and so are private woodlands, evident to any discerning passerby from the road. Early in the winter it is not difficult to spot and identify their respective fruits:

Amur Honeysuckle produces bright red berries that cling to the twig in paired formation. Robins, Bluebirds, Waxwings, Cardinals, House Finches and other birds devour these berries throughout the winter. Those not eaten seem to drop to the ground more readily than berries of the others. By March, by far, most honeysuckles have lost all of their berries, but with effort you can still find a few late hangers on scattered shrubs.

European Buckthorn produces loose clusters of bluish-black berries. They, too, are devoured by the feathered frugivores such that few berries remain suspended from twigs by March.



Buckthorn berries along the River Trail.

Oriental Bittersweet produces reddish-orange berries, the flesh of which becomes exposed in the fall after a desiccating thin, yellowish three-sectioned hull splits and curls back to reveal it. These bright hulls are commonly worn by the red berries like a tri-billed caps throughout the winter months and can even be noticed at a distance.

Unlike the shrubs mentioned above that compete with other plants and trees and with each other for space, the bittersweet vine seeks and corkscrews up any and all upright growth in a woodlot. Therefore anything else that grows there is fair game to be a bittersweet host. If not physically removed the vine inevitably strangles and kills it.

Most honeysuckles and buckthorns are less than fifteen feet in height, so they basically infest the understory of a three dimensional woodland, but bittersweet has the potential to climb shrubs and trees to all heights. You'll find it spiraling its way through all tiers of the forest to the very crowns of the tallest trees. From a distance on a sunny winter day, I can make out a red tint among the bare uppermost limbs of a tree's canopy, rife with bittersweet berries prime for picking.



Oriental Bittersweet berries.



Eastern Bluebird amid bittersweet berries.
<http://battlinginvasives.blogspot.com/2013/08/berries-and-birds.html>

For these reasons Oriental Bittersweet wins my vote for 'most insidious' of the three. From my observations in early March, despite being fed upon for several months by roving flocks of frugivores, there are still plenty more berries suspended in the canopy waiting for their bird to come in; the very definition of *glut*.

I have seen American Robins locally over consecutive winters for at least the past ten years, not so coincidentally with the expansion of these invasive berry-bearers. I trust that most avid birders in the area would verify this from their own experience. They'd likely concur too that, if anything, the 'Robins-in-winter' trend is advancing.

Frozen ground used to be a 'given' - a component descriptor of what makes winter *winter*. Attempt to dig a hole with a shovel at this time of year; you may as well be trying to dig through rock. This is as it has always been at this latitude through myriad generations before us, and not even very long ago in our own lives. Not anymore.

Daytime high temperatures in Lower Michigan through this winter have been above freezing more often than below. I could pick up a spade any week, step into my yard, and dig into the earth with relative ease.

Why on earth, would you ask, *is he digging with a shovel in the middle of winter?* If you are familiar with our in-house menagerie of Michigan-native reptiles and amphibians you might be aware that we need to regularly secure worms to feed various garter snakes, salamanders, frogs and turtles. We purchase a few dozen nightcrawlers a week to maintain them. All in all, the results were not worth all the digging, but I did manage to exhume a few cold worms... still an unprecedented feat in my lifetime for January.

As our winters fade to whimpers, how far are we from year-round Robins, sighted as reliably and regularly as Cardinals? How far are we, in fact, from Robins that are no longer just 'berry-sustained' through the winter? The sight out your window of a Robin pulling worms from your lawn in mid-January may be closer than you think.

-Jim McGrath

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**Visit Our
Nature Center
by Appointment**
Suggested Minimum Donation:
\$5/person/hour



Our female Watersnake shares a soak with a yearling.

The sky's the limit for natural science learning here – with a Michigan twist! Adults, couples and families are welcome to schedule an 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 unique, in-person, hands-on experiences here are unmatched by a trip to a 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.



Hand-feed our baby Painted and Blanding's turtles.

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 gartersnakes and watersnakes while learning identification tips and behavior traits, then watch them gobble up worms and 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 and bird song, trees, vines, and invasive plants at winter's end.

Ask about arranging custom field trips or natural science lessons to supplement your students' interests and grade-specific science requirements.

Contact us for more info or to make an appointment most any day or evening.



A Northern Leopard Frog eyeballs the camera.

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Spring Break Wild Times Day Camp

**Monday & Wednesday
March 27 & 29, 9am-3pm**

For children K and older. This intimate day camp has a maximum enrollment of only five participants. Choose either day while spaces are available.

There is so much to do here that a camp day just flies by! A combination of indoor and outdoor activities include lots of time interacting with scads of specimens of 37 species of small and large Michigan-native reptiles and amphibians housed here, including turtles, frogs, salamanders and lizards. Participants never grow tired of handling our huge Black Ratsnakes. Our two tortoises, Milberta the Red-footed Tortoise and Fyodor the Russian Tortoise love to eat, and will munch lettuce right from the campers' hands.

Outdoor time involves activities on and off-trail across our six acres experiencing birds, bugs, frogs, snakes and more. Weather-permitting, students will sample early spring life that is beginning to stir in our vernal ponds out back. They will also learn how to identify and eliminate invasive alien plants, shrubs and vines.

Pack a bag lunch. A mid-morning snack will be served.

COST: \$80/student per day. Advance registration required.
Contact us to reserve a day.





Photo © Steve Sage.

Spring Break

Wild Birds

Field Trip

Thursday, March 30

8am-2pm

For students 5th grade & older

Jim will lead an intimate group of only 5 students and travel by van to an array of natural habitats throughout Mid-Michigan in search of bird diversity amid early spring migration time.

Students will tally up to 50 birds or more on personal checklists we provide, including over a dozen species of waterfowl, an active bald eagle nest, plus hawks and owls on nests, too. Our powerful spotting scope allows for extra close-up looks. Bring binoculars if you have them (Compacts NOT recommended). Don't have a good pair of your own? That's okay. We have several pairs available for participants to borrow.

COST: \$90. Pack a bag lunch and water bottle, and be sure to dress for weather conditions. Advance registration required.

Summer Day Camp: *Mid-Michigan* *Field Birding* *June 19-22*

For students 5th grade & older

8am to 3pm. In this whirlwind 4-day adventure an intimate group of only 5 participants will try to encounter as many birds as possible in a variety of habitats. Each day we'll head in a different direction within an hour drive of Williamston to see up to 90 species, many of which you don't find just anywhere. Birders will keep their own personal checklists. Bring a good pair of binoculars. (Compact binoculars NOT recommended. Borrow ours!) Serious birders only, please. FEE: \$325 (\$150 NR deposit).



Tree Swallow.

Photo © Steve Sage.

Reserve a Summer Day Camp Week for Your Own Pod of Kids

“Create your own” day camp! Collaborating parents can choose one of these 4-day weeks on a first-come basis: **July 31-Aug 3, August 7-10, August 14-17** for your personalized group of up to 5 students (sibs, friends) ages 7 and older (Please limit the age range of participating kids to no more than 3 years.).

The camp days run from 9am to 3pm. A combination of indoor and outdoor experiences includes time interacting with our many Michigan reptiles & amphibians, insect-catching, birding, field trips to local natural areas and more. The personalized aspect allows for planning between parents and kids to customize the camp to their favorite specific things to do!

COST: \$1500 for up to 5 students. Contact us to reserve a week. Then, a 50% deposit is required to secure it, payable by check or CC/Paypal thru our website.

Deadline for reservations is March 25. Contact us for further details.



*We appreciate all the supporters of our mission,
past and present. A special “thank you”
to our most recent donors...*

*Will Gold
Jan Heminger
Okemos
Nursery School
Marge Pestka
Tricia Thompson*





Around the State in March

Sunday, March 5: 2pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Presentation; Gerald Eddy Environmental Ed Center, Chelsea.

Friday, March 10: 6:30-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Hiawatha Elementary, Okemos.

Monday, March 13: 6pm. MI Snakes Presentation, Cheboygan Public Library, Cheboygan.

Thursday, March 16: 6pm. MI Snakes Presentation; Indian River Area Library, Indian River.

Monday, March 20: 6:30-8pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Cornell Elementary, Okemos.

Tuesday, March 21: 1pm. MI Snakes Presentation, Whittemore Library, Whittemore.

Tuesday, March 21: 4pm. MI Snakes Presentation, Johnston Memorial Library, Standish.

Wednesday, March 22: 6-7:30pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Murphy Elementary, Haslett.

A Dose of Flygskam

The No-Jet Set: They've Given Up Flying to Save the Planet

https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/06/travel/travel-climate-no-fly-pledge.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20230209&instance_id=84903&nl=the-morning®i_id=97652655&segment_id=124816&te=1&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e



From <https://flightfree.org/>

The solution to the climate crisis is straightforward: to significantly reduce our emissions. Flying in an airplane is the most polluting activity we commonly do. Pledge to not fly, as a signal to our communities, leaders, and businesses that climate solutions are needed now. Together, we can reduce emissions, shift the fossil fuel norm, and lay the foundation for strong climate policy. Take action and demand system change!

From <https://noflyclimatesci.org/>

Why the focus on flying? Hour for hour, there's no better way to burn fossil fuel and heat the planet. Flying is also the domain of the globally privileged, and perhaps the most important example of lifestyle change we'll all need to accept, sooner or later, as we transition away from fossil fuel: there's no feasible replacement for fossil-fueled long-haul aviation at its current scale.

-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

The personal actions that cut climate pollution fast are to go flight-, car-, and meat-free. Start with the one that feels most feasible for you; if you can't totally go without, aim to cut your consumption today at least in half. – Kimberly Nicholas, Under the Sky We Make

What if we had storytelling mechanisms that said it is important that you know about the well-being of wildlife in your neighborhood? –Robin Wall Kimmerer



Less Beef = Less CO₂
Cowspiracy.com

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



Flightfree.org



RSPO.org



insideclimatenews.org

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