



Tundra swans on the move in November. Photo © Greg Smith.

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Look Up for November Rewards

“Awareness” is a critical term – if not, the springboard - in Nature Discovery’s mission statement. Achievement of a sense of value toward wild things, and, more broadly, toward natural communities and ecosystems, can’t begin without the light bulb of awareness first clicking on. In many cases we feel our job could end there. In Michigan alone there are countless wild wonders that go unnoticed, and, therefore, unappreciated by the average citizen. Indeed, the broader your awareness of the myriad intricacies of the natural world the more interesting your time outdoors becomes! A revelation formulates and gathers strength, incrementally, with each species acknowledged: this stuff is of critical worth - to preserve, protect and respect. Inherently, it blossoms into a global perspective: The health of the planet, like the integrity of a complex jigsaw puzzle, depends on keeping the pieces together.

Here are a couple of high-flying puzzle pieces of which anyone anywhere in Lower Michigan can become aware, then have a chance to experience in November. Of course, being in the right place at the right time helps. Two large, but, otherwise, very different birds that breed in biomes to our north are migrating over our collective neighborhoods now. However, if spotting a migratory flock of Tundra Swans in V-formation high over the treetops requires a bit of luck, a migrating Golden Eagle is a needle that happens to be nestled in a much more formidable haystack.

Regarding swans one might be inclined to say, “What’s the big deal? I see swans on Lake Lansing (or Park Lake, the Grand River, et al.) all the time.” Actually, three swan species can be seen within our state’s borders. The introduced Mute Swan, is, by far, seen by most. It is non-migratory and considered a pest on many wetlands. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources and Michigan Audubon Society acknowledge that native waterfowl, and, in most cases, people would be better off without Mute Swans occupying our waters. The bright orange bill is unmistakable at long distances.

Our native swans, the Trumpeter and Tundra, sport solid black bills. The Trumpeter was extirpated in the state from overhunting by the early 1900s. However, through the 80s and 90s captive breeding and reintroduction programs have met with substantial success. Today, increasing numbers of breeding pairs are occupying wetlands throughout the state.

The migratory Tundra Swan breeds across the biome for which it is named. In the eastern U.S. the bulk of its southward migration terminates along the southern shore of Lake Erie and along the Atlantic Coast in the vicinity of Chesapeake Bay. Tens of thousands pass back and forth through Lower Michigan, mostly in late March and November. En route, a flock may also alight on any large body of water or agricultural field to rest and feed.

We learn at an early age that birds will migrate north-to-south in the fall, then, vice versa in the spring. However, when it comes to Tundra Swans and folks in Lower Michigan the migratory direction gets turned on its ear... West-to-east, then east-to-west! In the fall flocks will wing their way southward from the tundra across the U.S. border west of Lake Superior. Further south they hang an abrupt left, some of them traversing Lake Michigan, then crossing the Lower Peninsula on their way to more easterly wintering waters.

Personal observations spanning thirty years of residence here have corroborated this unusual flight plan. Also, with rare exception, I hear them before I see them. Like flocks of honking geese and trilling cranes, Tundra Swans converse constantly while on the wing. The calls within a passing flock are of a higher pitch than that of a goose. Many field guides describe the sound as many-voiced *cooing*.

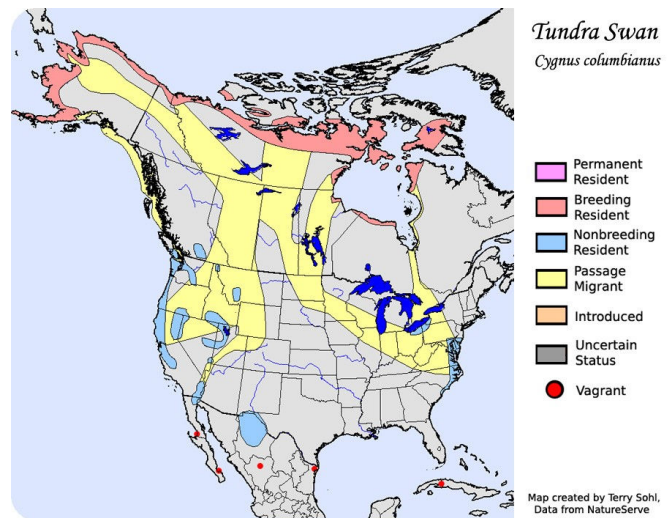
I'll be outside on a particular day in almost any weather condition, raking leaves, or maybe jogging or walking around the country block. A soft, auditory wisp - so faint that I'm not sure I actually heard it - seeps through the white noise of wind, dry rustling leaves, or car traffic. Was that a distant *coo*? I stop what I'm doing in order to better hear. Another faint *coo* cuts through the static. Then another, now stronger. I pivot to face the directional origin almost invariably, west. With each passing second more *coos* fill the air, the volume steadily increasing. The source of the cacophony suddenly spills into view over the treetops. Sometimes birds are arranged in a single, huge flock of one hundred or more. Other times the flock has broken into a few smaller Vs and check-marks against the sky.

If I'm lucky the flock passes directly overhead. Often, however, it passes just north or south of my position, but *always* in an easterly mien. I think I've heard/seen the most Tundra flocks pass during the first half of November, but one in particular created a lifelong auditory and visual memory - a late flock directly over the house on a frosty, clear Thanksgiving morning.

In contrast to Tundra Swans far fewer Golden Eagles migrate through our state. They pass overhead, not in noisy flocks but in solitary quietude. Though difficult to miss against a wide open blue or gray backdrop, an individual utters not a peep of announcement to its passing. If you don't happen to gaze skyward during its half-minute pass, you - like the vast majority of ground-bound Michiganders - will remain clueless to the window of opportunity that opened, then closed.

Thanks to an incredible resurgence from the brink of extinction, a Bald Eagle sighting can take place just about any season in any corner of the state today. Nests have been reported in nearly every county, but the Golden Eagle - a more common raptor out west - breeds nowhere within our state.

There is, however, a breeding population in eastern Canada. It is concentrated mostly in northern Ontario and Quebec. Overwintering takes place in the eastern states. Those that cut through our state on



http://sdakotabirds.com/species/maps/tundra_swan_map.htm

their southward course typically fly through the base of the mitten right now, peaking in the first week of November. (Check out Detroit River Hawk Watch's Count Data, which includes the migration period through the area for the Golden Eagle as well as for that of all other diurnal raptors passing through the state: <http://www.drhawkwatch.org/count-data>.)

An immature Bald Eagle, with its mostly-dark overall appearance is often mistaken for a Golden Eagle. When viewed high overhead the wingspan of each is close enough to be indistinguishable, but there are specific markings for each that should leave no doubt as to which one it is. An immature Bald, while mostly dark, shows a smattering of white markings inside the leading edge or "armpit" of each wing. An adult Golden is virtually all dark from head to tail, but you are more likely to set eyes on a first or second-year bird. These immature birds bear a prominent white spot, smack in the center of each wing. This identification feature is unmistakable, even at high altitudes. Also, a wide, dark, terminal tail band stands out prominently against the pale base of its tail.



A young Golden Eagle shows off its identification-clinching wing spots and banded tail.

Photo © Greg Smith

Like Bald Eagles, Golden Eagles do not need to migrate into the deep-south to find winter food. For the Bald Eagle the presence of open water to access fish and waterfowl is the main determinant. The Golden Eagle feeds largely on squirrels but will often take larger mammal prey. Deep winter snow hampers hunting success, so most eastern individuals will migrate just far enough to avoid it. They settle no further than southern Illinois and Indiana.



Immature Golden Eagles soaring at higher altitudes still plainly show their key identification features.

Photo © Greg Smith

Occasionally, a Golden Eagle ekes out the winter within Michigan's borders. Birds are spotted in some winters among the woodlots surrounding Muskegon Wastewater Facility. Some have also been spotted at Maple River State Game area north of St. Johns. One might potentially be spotted in a rural area near you, especially if local woodlots are nutty with squirrels.

In our techno-driven, multitasking existence we hardly need one more distraction, but this is as "no-tech" as it gets. While outside, keep looking up. If you do it in the coming days and weeks with a regularity rivaling that of the most absorbed "cell-phonees," your chances of spotting swans or an eagle get a whole lot better!

-Jim McGrath

Catch Jim on Coffee Break Thursday, November 19

Jim is scheduled to appear on Thursday, November 19 at 9:30am, discussing wildlife 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 page.





Long-eared Owls are often found in winter at Lake Erie Metropark. Photo Steve Sage

Open Hours

Sunday, November 15

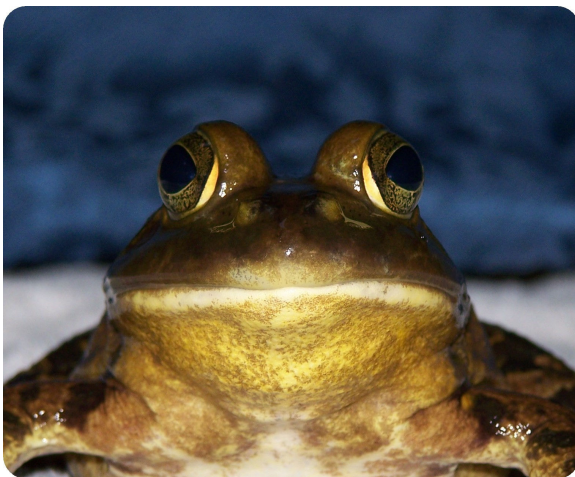
1 to 5pm; \$5 admission

2pm Presentation

Michigan Owls in Winter

There are more owls to be seen in Lower Michigan in the winter than at any other time of the year. In addition to our permanent resident Great-horned, Barred and Screech owls, a number of Canadian species like Snowy, Short-eared, Long-eared, and Saw-whet owls wander southward in the winter in search of small mammal prey. While viewing beautiful Powerpoint images, learn about the identification, behavior and vocalizations of each, as well as where and how to find them.

Interact with our huge zoo of Michigan snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders before, during, or after the presentation. Our knowledgeable staff is always on hand to help visitors of all ages make the most of their visit!



Thanksgiving Eve

Michigan Wildlife Day Camp

Wednesday, November 25

9am-3pm

For K thru middle school. If your children have the day before Thanksgiving off school (or even a half day – we'll pro-rate it!) enroll them in a day of in-your-face Michigan wildlife. All students will spend time learning about, holding and feeding cold-blooded occupants of our huge zoo of Michigan snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders. We'll also spend time engaged in outside activities. A hot lunch is provided. COST: \$55/student. Call or email to enroll in advance.



Northern Harrier.

Photo © Steve Sage.

Allegan County Birding Day

Saturday, November 21

6:30am to 4:30pm

On Saturday, November 21, from 6:00am to about 5:00pm, join us on a guided trip to Allegan County for some great, late-fall birding. Jim will lead and drive a maximum of five participants on this full-day odyssey to tally as many species as possible through a multitude of West Michigan habitats. We'll bird for waterfowl, gulls and eagles along the Lake Michigan shoreline and encounter a slew of other species while traversing field, forest and dune habitats. Rough-legged Hawks, Northern Harriers, kestrels, shrikes, Snow Buntings and many more species are in store. Locations include Saugatuck Dunes State Park, Douglas Public Beach, Morrison Bayou, Allegan State Game Area, and the South Haven Jetty.

Weather-permitting, we should tally up to 50 species. Most of the birding will be near the vehicle or relatively short hikes from the vehicle. We'll stop for lunch at Crane's Pie Pantry Restaurant in Fennville. Each participant will also receive a Michigan Birds checklist to keep track of the day's finds.

COST: Only \$70/person, includes all transportation. Meet at Nature Discovery. With notice, we can also arrange to pick you up at a convenient location for you. Contact us to reserve a spot.

Exxon's Campaign of Deceit Makes VW, Big Tobacco Look Like Amateurs

Here are some links worth perusing, listed in order of publication:

<http://climatecrocks.com/2015/10/09/la-times-is-now-on-the-exxon-knew-story/>

<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/oct/14/exxons-climate-lie-change-global-warming>

<http://www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-exxon-climate-change-20151015-story.html>

<http://insideclimatenews.org/news/16102015/two-us-representatives-seek-justice-department-inquiry-exxon>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_9Dzs1-sd0&feature=youtu.be&t=4m30s

<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/oct/28/imagine-if-exxon-had-told-the-truth-on-climate-change>

<http://www.whitehouse.senate.gov/news/speeches/time-to-wake-up-what-exxon-knew-about-climate-change->

-JM

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