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# Snakes at Work



*An extremely hands-on experience with our Western Foxsnake.*

“They work hard for the mousie so you better treat ‘em right.”

Whew, what a busy stretch for our Michigan-native snakes! Over eight consecutive days from October 15 to 22 they traveled over 700 miles, while in the process being introduced to 22 separate audiences totaling close to a thousand people. In every venue the snakes were not only shown and discussed, but touched and handled by nearly all participants.



*A young visitor at Calvary Baptist Church's Fall Family Festival, initially skeptical, 'wears' a 6-foot ratsnake with confidence.*

The stint began with consecutive weekend days in which Carol and I set up and staffed a Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians exhibit which included snakes in addition to tanks of frogs and a pool of swimming turtles, first at an Ypsilanti church's Fall Family Festival then, closer to home, at Williamstown Township's Fall Harvest Festival.

By far, the snakes garner the most attention. We routinely remove them from tanks for visitors to touch and even personally handle if they desire, while disseminating sound information that serves well to quell uncertainty and fear. Adults and kids often approach with skepticism but leave with a newfound understanding and fascination for wild snakes - the same species they may encounter around their yards or around the state.

Too early the next morning for man or snake, I packed individuals of eight species and drove north all the way to the tip of the mitten. I was due to present to fifth graders in Cheboygan throughout the school day. The arrangements were made in advance by Jim Bricker and Straits Area Audubon Society.

I first met Kathy and Jim Bricker in spring of 2008 at a Michigan Snakes Alive program that I was contracted to give for Michigan Audubon Society at Whitefish Point in the U.P. A particularly enthusiastic retired couple was in the audience. After the presentation they introduced themselves, and Kathy insisted that we arrange not only for me to present to their local Audubon Society but to students in their community, as well. Little did I know at the time what a long and fruitful relationship this was to become.

Starting in 2009 I have been contracted annually by SAAS to present Nature Discovery's Michigan Snakes Alive program in northern Michigan schools. Kathy Bricker was the energetic straw that stirred this drink which, within a few years was to swell into a veritable punchbowl.

After experiencing my presentation Kathy worked tirelessly to raise earmarked funds from area schools, businesses and individuals then scheduled the presentation for fifth graders in a few area communities. She also arranged for me to present the same program at the SAAS monthly meeting. Kathy and Jim hosted me and our legless stars over these few days in their Cheboygan area home. Folding tables were set up in their living room to support several tanks' worth of them.



*From 2018, Kathy Bricker and I bring a ratsnake into a branch of Awakon Federal Credit Union to personally thank them for a donation.*

The presentations were an overwhelming success, evinced by the fact that the same schools re-upped the following year for their next batch of fifth graders. Kathy didn't stop fundraising, though, and introduced the program to still more school superintendents and principals. That year and over ensuing years a full week was packed with school presentations. Word continued to spread from one year to the next, and even more schools wanted in. Kathy informed me that a growing number were expressing disappointment that we were unable to squeeze them into the week, so we began discussing the possibility of my driving up for a second week of presentations each school year.

For the first ten years we had always scheduled a week in early spring but the 2019-20 school year was to be the first in which we would expand to two weeks of presentations – one in the fall and a second in the spring.



*SAAS board member, Rose Rynerson, assists Cheboygan fifth graders in handling snakes after our first post-COVID presentation.*

The Snakes Alive week in October progressed in schools without a hitch, and Kathy had already filled a designated week in March with more schools. When March finally arrived the snakes and I were poised to hit the road to do it again... Then the pandemic hit. The week's slate was abruptly canceled and all future programs shelved until further notice.

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Two school years later we're back in action! Schools anxious to restart the program quickly filled the docket; Monday through Friday, morning and afternoon between October 17th and 21st. An intensive series of presentations for seventeen separate audiences went as smoothly as if there had never been an interruption... despite one gaping absence. Kathy was no longer among us.

A persistent health issue near the start of the pandemic was eventually diagnosed as late stage ovarian cancer. Prior to her death last March, Kathy adamantly insisted that the Michigan Snakes Alive programs continue after she was gone. SAAS and her husband Jim honored her wish and grabbed the baton.



After most every presentation, a school teacher or principal who had gotten to know Kathy and her commitment to the cause commented that they could feel her spirit or energy in the room. It felt that way to us, as well.

As the week drew to a close I congratulated Jim on gathering and coordinating all the moving pieces to make it such a successful week. He quickly deflected the credit to Kathy. She had done the hard part, he said, by initially contacting school administrators, business owners and other potential donors then talking up the uniqueness and potential impact of the presentation on the youth of their communities. He merely had to call them back. Kathy had ‘sold’ them on it years ago.



*Harbor Springs High School biology students handle a variety of state-native snakes.*

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I arrived home Friday evening and arranged the snakes comfortably in their tanks, but they were to be back at it the next day. Carol took some of the snakes along with a few turtles and frogs as an educationally entertaining show for a child’s afternoon birthday party in Williamston. Afterward, they were able to relax in their tanks for only a couple of hours. Then I hauled them out for one more gig that evening in Howell.

Over more than a decade professional photographer, Noreen Owens has contracted us on several occasions to bring snakes as live props for specialty photo shoots. She also photographed our son, Glen’s high school senior portrait, incidentally, with a live snake acting as his necktie. This fall she requested the presence of some of our large snakes for a big Halloween bash she was hosting for family and friends. Over a two hour period at the party, groups of costumed adults and families filed into her basement studio and posed



*A Halloween-costumed family poses with ratsnakes for Noreen Owens Photography (noreenowens.com).*

for a photo portrait in front of a spooky graveyard backdrop. As each small group entered the studio, some were surprised, others flat-out horrified at the sight of the large constrictors, only to then find out they were expected to handle them as props for their portrait.

Over the course of the night I met and chatted with a revolving door of costume-clad attendees. True to human nature I witnessed a full gamut of reactions. I introduced them as Black Ratsnakes - the largest and one of the rarest snakes in the state, assured them that there was no chance the snakes would bite, then answered any questions they had. They touched and got comfortable holding them. Then, I helped arrange the snakes in their arms or around shoulders for the best camera angles.

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Our perfectly-behaved, hard-working, and effective snake-ambassadors to the human race do indeed deserve to be treated right, and they are. The following day, I made it a point to offer an extra thawed rodent to each one. There are lots of ways that you or your kids can experience our Michigan snakes:

- Schedule a Michigan Snakes Alive presentation at a club or organizational meeting.
- Arrange for the presentation to be given in a school classroom, pre-K through 12th grade.
- Schedule a snake-themed party for kids *and* adults.
- Make an appointment to visit our private nature center north of Williamston.

Check out our Facebook page for more photos.

—Jim McGrath

# Nature Discovery

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## Visit Our Nature Center by Appointment

**Suggested Minimum  
Donation: \$5/person/hr**



*A pair of Common Musk Turtles.*

The sky's the limit for natural learning here – with a Michigan twist! Adults, couples and families are welcome to schedule an intimate indoor and/or outdoor visit to what we call “The Biggest Little Nature Center in Michigan,” and “Home to the Largest Zoo of Michigan-native Reptiles and Amphibians.” We will bring snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders out of tanks to interact with adults or kids of any age. A terrific option for visiting families over Thanksgiving Weekend.



*Hold our little hognose snake.*

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 and minnows. Hold or “wear” a gentle 6-foot Black Ratsnake – 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, bugs, trees, vines, and invasive plants.

### Ask us about...

- ... field trips for academic classes, pre-K thru college.
- ... weekly or biweekly drop-off visits with experiential activities for your elementary thru high school student(s).
- ... volunteer opportunities for high school students and adults.
- ... arranging a guided interpretive experience at a local natural area of your or our choosing for your small group of students, adults or families.



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## **Thanksgiving Eve** **Michigan Wildlife** **Day Camp**

**Wednesday, November 23**  
**9am-3pm**



For K thru middle school.



The day before Thanksgiving enroll your child for a day of in-your-face Michigan wildlife. All students will spend time learning about, holding and feeding the cold-blooded occupants of our huge interactive zoo of Michigan snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders.

Our popular, big Red-footed Tortoise, Milberta, is always looking for a handout of greens, and campers are quick to oblige.

Campers can't get enough of holding and wearing any of several gentle, 6-foot-long Black Ratsnakes in our zoo. It's Michigan's largest snake!

We'll also spend time engaged in outside activities, including identifying, cutting and pulling invasive shrubs and vines that are known to erode local woodland ecology.

Participants should pack a bag lunch and dress for weather forecast for the day.

**COST: \$80/student.** The roster size is limited so contact us soon to reserve a spot.



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## Muskegon Area Guided Birding

**Saturday, November 26**  
**6:30am to 4:30pm**



Ring-necked Duck.

Photo © Steve Sage

On Saturday, November 26 join us on a guided trip to the Muskegon area for some great, late-fall birding. Jim will lead and drive a maximum of five adult participants on this full-day odyssey to tally as many species as possible through habitats that harbor *thousands* of birds.

Wastewater treatment facilities are typically hot birding locales. The expansive Muskegon Wastewater Facility, several miles from Lake Michigan, allows birders to acquire a special permit to access their facility. Jim has one! Vast holding ponds of various depths are waterfowl magnets. The water birds in turn, attract predatory hawks, eagles and owls.



A Purple Sandpiper on the breakwater.

Miles of dikes surround the ponds crammed with thousands of ducks of over a dozen species, plus geese, swans, grebes and more. Open area north and south of the ponds offer potential for a slew of other species, including eagles, Rough-legged Hawks, kestrels, shrikes, Snow Buntings and lots more.

We'll head to Lake Michigan to pick up more birds from the shore and on the breakwater. Diving ducks, loons, grebes and more, forage here. The uncommon Purple Sandpiper migrates along Lake Michigan in late fall. With luck, we may find one foraging on the rocky breakwater.

Weather-permitting, we should tally nearly 50 species. Minimal walking is required. Participants will receive a Michigan Birds checklist to tally the day's finds.

**COST:** Only \$75/person, includes transportation. Meet at Nature Discovery. With notice, we can also arrange to pick you up at another more convenient location. Contact us to reserve a spot.



***Thank you to all past and  
current supporters of our mission,  
including these donors  
the past month...***

*Jim Bricker  
JT Brown  
Grey, John, Shelley & Ron Cichy  
Will Gold  
Jan Heminger  
Noreen Owens  
Chris Paige  
Soaring High Christian  
Homeschool Group  
The Zellner Family*



<https://www.cheboygannews.com/story/news/environment/2022/10/01/kathy-brickers-environmental-legacy-lives-on-in-new-les-cheneaux-islands-preserve/69523310007/>

## ***Vote to Defy a ‘One-sided’ Coin Toss***

In what bizarre universe are the two outcomes of a coin toss *Heads, I win... Tails, you cheated* ? Ask the hundreds of political candidates at every level of government who have become so emboldened that many of them no longer feel a need to mask their intent to decry the validity of the election’s outcome if it is not in their favor. Join us in voting in this election like your country’s democracy, as well as the freedom that too many take for granted, depends on it.

An interview with Robin Wall Kimmerer...

[https://www.sciencefriday.com/segments/braiding-sweetgrass-land-book/?utm\\_source=radio&utm\\_medium=onaircta&utm\\_campaign=bookclub&utm\\_content=](https://www.sciencefriday.com/segments/braiding-sweetgrass-land-book/?utm_source=radio&utm_medium=onaircta&utm_campaign=bookclub&utm_content=)

Three recent *Letters from an American*, by Heather Cox Richardson...

[https://open.substack.com/pub/heathercoxrichardson/p/november-3-2022?r=dpj5a&utm\\_campaign=post&utm\\_medium=email](https://open.substack.com/pub/heathercoxrichardson/p/november-3-2022?r=dpj5a&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email)

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We highly recommend subscribing to this free daily newsletter from an accomplished political historian. I start each morning reading it over a cup of coffee.

-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.*



Less Beef = Less CO<sub>2</sub>  
Cowspiracy.com

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



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