



A Black-throated Green Warbler descends from the treetops to investigate.
Photo © Steve Sage.

THIS ISSUE

**Sunday, October 11 / MI Waterfowl
Around the State in October
Coffee Break, October 15
Muskegon Area Birding, Oct 23
LCC Saturday GATE Classes
Competitive C-Footprint Shrinkage**

Does a Birder Pish in the Woods?

...One that wants to see birds up-close does!

Every songbird species has its own repertoire of unique songs, contact calls, chips, tweets and warbles. With practice, most can be identified by these sounds in the environment without ever getting a look at them. However, one particular sound bit emitted by any (although highly varied between species) has a universally recognizable quality: often harsh or staccato, and rapidly repeated. The corresponding message is also universally understood: agitation, excitement, *danger!*

A perceived predator that comes too close to a songbird's nest will elicit these sounds. More frequently, no matter what time of year, if a songbird is busy foraging and suddenly discovers a lurking predator it immediately sounds the alarm. Rather than fly away, it often opts to keep its eye on the fox, cat, hawk, or owl. Many predators rely on ambush or surprise to capture their prey, but a smaller, quicker, more agile songbird that is aware of the predator's position is much less likely to become food.

The excited calls are a siren to all birds within hearing range. Their response? Again, rather than fly away they make a beeline to the source. Within minutes, ten or twenty individuals may actively gather in the surrounding branches, collective eyes on the "outed" culprit. Each of these, in turn, voices its own excitement over the find. The result is a frenzied crescendo that can often be recognized at quite a distance. When outside, keep your ears alert. I've gotten many great looks at owls and foxes that I, otherwise, never would have known were present.

To wit, I found the only fledgling Northern Saw-whet Owl of my life while camping at Hartwick Pines State Park. At daybreak I was awakened in our tent by the excited sounds of multiple songbirds. Grabbing my binoculars I exited the tent and easily found the location of the action – a small black cherry tree about one hundred feet behind the tent. The mobbing birds ignored my approach, but the hapless owlet – reminiscent of a little, brown Furby – calmly followed my movements through large, round, yellow eyes. A few strands of down still clung to its feathered scalp.

We even found one of our lost rat snakes in the front yard by way of songbirds aflutter... The Black Rat Snake is a large and rare Michigan constrictor. It is highly arboreal, and inhabits mature forest habitats. It feeds on small mammals, like squirrels and mice, and on small birds and their nest contents.



A roosting screech-owl is in for a rude awakening if a foraging songbird discovers it and sounds the alarm.
Photo © Greg Smith.

I teach weekly on Michigan wildlife topics at Montessori Children's House in Lansing, Stepping Stones Montessori in East Lansing, and Okemos Nursery School. Children of all ages enthusiastically soak up information about the wild topic of the week. The parental feedback is especially telling. We regularly hear that, after the lesson, the child is nearly bursting to share the information learned that day.

This week I divulged that I was going to bestow on them the ability to coax wild songbirds to come close to them... not with a handful of birdseed. I called it "The Power of the Pish."

I asked students if they were familiar with the story of the boy who cried "wolf." Most were aware of the gist of it, but we reviewed to make sure. In a sense the alarmed bird is crying "wolf," and triggering others to respond, but it will never give the call for kicks just to see how many neighbors it can rile... Well, except maybe a Blue Jay.

Unleashing The Power of the Pish is, in fact, the act of crying "wolf," too, but with the intent of fooling any songbirds within hearing range. If you see a chickadee, nuthatch, or two - or almost any songbirds for that matter - from afar, face the bird(s) and begin making a harsh sound most easily described in print as "psh!" It requires pursing your lips to form the "p" then bursting the "sh" sound behind it. If you do it properly you are almost spraying it more than saying it. Birding etiquette tip: Do not attempt while facing another birder at close range.

To mimic an excited songbird the pishes should be strung together in a random series of two, three, four and five in a row smattered with short pauses. In many cases, the birds at a distance will suddenly stop what they're doing, attention piqued. A few pishes more and here they come. Suddenly, they are excitedly branch-hopping at much closer range. Sometimes a bird will begin to emit its own harsh calls, but most remain silent despite coming so close. The reason, I suspect, is because they are not yet seeing the alleged predator.

Enjoy their close proximity while it lasts because they eventually figure it out... Nothing going on here but this harmless, lumbering mammal. One by one they vacate the area to get on with their lives.

Also, don't be discouraged if you try this once or a few times without results. Some individuals respond while others don't. Try it frequently enough and you are sure to run the gamut of responses, from zero to

One summer afternoon our adult male - nearly six feet in length - got out of its enclosure in our classroom. Unfortunately, no one was in the room at the time and the back door was wide open. An hour later we realized it was out and that it most certainly had gone right out the open doorway. A search around the outside walls and bushes yielded nothing. We were crushed at the loss.

The following morning, our son Glen heard a frenzy of avian static coming from the front yard. He looked out the window and spotted the action taking place among the high limbs of our tall, roadside red maple. The birds had, indeed, found the snake and were sounding the alarm with gusto. Viewing in shifts, we kept our eyes on its location in the tree for hours afterward. It spent most of the time curled inside an old woodpecker hole. Finally, in mid-afternoon it crawled down the trunk and into our arms. Relieved at its return we still marveled over the fact that it gravitated to the tallest tree in the yard then followed its genetically-innate impulse right up the trunk.

absolutely mobbed. On several occasions my pishing has brought as many as thirty birds, simultaneously, within ten feet of where I stood. However, conversely, just like the boy in the story, too much pishing in the same location is sure to yield diminishing returns. The most effective pishing is done selectively, and over a range of localities.

Just a few weeks ago, Carol and I were biking a country road between Ludington and Manistee. As we passed a stand of roadside pines I noticed quite a few warblers foraging among the needles. I stopped and began pishing. The response was incredible. In addition to the responding birds immediately in front of us, more individuals from the trees up the road flew out of the branches and headed toward the sound. Most of the growing mob appeared to be comprised of young Pine Warblers, as well as Magnolia, Yellow-rumped, and, no doubt, more migratory species. One warbler flew from the low branches overhanging the shoulder and briefly hovered only inches over Carol's head as if contemplating whether this was a suitable perch from which to look out for the supposed predator.

My most noteworthy draw was a complete surprise in more ways than one. On a dreary, early May afternoon I had finished teaching at Montessori Children's House, but didn't bother going home because I had another appointment in Lansing that evening. Since I had a couple hours to kill I brought my binoculars and decided to bird some of the trails at Fenner Nature Center. Migratory songbirds were quite active despite the intermittent drizzle.

At one point near the old buffalo pen I noticed the silhouette of a small songbird near the top of a tree against the gray sky. I could not make out any color or markings, so I began pishing. Apparently this one wasn't fooled, but, suddenly I heard a flutter of small wings behind my head. I turned and gaped at the sight - an endangered Kirtland's Warbler at eye level only an arms-length away. More pishing kept the bird close. It pumped its tail and hopped from twig to twig, watching me through its telltale broken white eye-ring for nearly a minute before dismissing the emergency as a false alarm.



There are so few individuals of the endangered Kirtland' Warbler, this species is seldom seen during migration. It breeds in northern Michigan and overwinters in The Bahamas. Photo © Greg Smith.

Call me a prude, but I've never been comfortable pishing in front of strangers. Most people don't know or understand the bells, whistles and other vagaries associated with effective birding, and I don't like the idea of passers-by thinking I'm unstable. Otherwise, I'm not ashamed to admit that, yes, I quite often pish in the woods, but I've got the up-close bird encounters to justify it!

-Jim McGrath



Around the State in October

- ❖ **Saturday, October 10: 1 to 6pm. Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Cranefest, Baker Sanctuary, Bellevue.**
- ❖ **Saturday, October 24: 11am to 3pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Spooky Science Saturday, Kingman Museum, Battle Creek.**



© Steve Sage

American Widgeon.

Photo © Steve Sage.

A Powerpoint Field Guide to Michigan Waterfowl

Sunday, October 11

Admission: \$5

Doors open from 1 to 5pm.

Many Michiganders are surprised to learn that there are over 40 species of waterfowl to be encountered within our state's borders throughout the year. At 2pm, sit-in on our original presentation, *A Powerpoint Field Guide to Michigan Waterfowl*. Beautiful images of loons, grebes and cormorants join a slew of species of ducks, geese and swans. Learn the identification, behavior, migratory habits and seasonality of each species, in addition to where and when to find them.

At the presentation's conclusion participants are invited to carpool to Park Lake to view and identify migrant waterfowl from the shoreline. Bring binoculars. We'll have a spotting scope available for especially close viewing.

Don't forget our interactive Michigan-native reptiles & amphibians zoo! Before, during or after the presentation visitors of all ages are encouraged to spend time here. With all ten of our state's turtle species, all thirteen frog species, nine of the state's ten salamanders and thirteen of the state's seventeen snakes, it's the largest live collection in the state!



Catch Nature Discovery on WLNZ Radio's Coffee Break on Thursday, October 15

Jim is scheduled to appear on Thursday, October 15 at 9:30am, to discuss a Michigan wildlife topic. 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.

Muskegon Area Waterfowl Watching

*Friday, October 23
6:30am to 4pm*



Wood Duck pair.

Photo © Steve Sage.

On Friday, October 23, from 6:30am to about 4pm, join us on a guided trip to the Muskegon area for some great, 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 habitats that harbor thousands of birds.

We will visit the expansive Muskegon Wastewater Facility, several miles from Lake Michigan. Driveable dikes border vast holding ponds crammed with a wide variety of ducks, geese, swans, grebes, and other species. Miles of open area north and south of the ponds offer other birds, including Bald Eagles, Northern Harriers, Rough-legged Hawks, kestrels, and songbirds.

We'll stop for lunch then head to Lake Michigan to pick up more birds from the shore and on the breakwater.

Weather-permitting, we should tally over 50 species. Most of the birding will be in or near the vehicle. The only extended walking will be on the breakwater. Dress warmly, bring binoculars and plan to stop for lunch. Jim's spotting scope will be available for especially up-close viewing. Each participant will also receive a Michigan Birds checklist to keep track of the day's finds.

COST: Only \$60/person, includes all transportation. Meet at Nature Discovery. With notice, we can also arrange to pick you up at a more convenient location for you. Contact us to make a reservation.

Enroll Your Student in a Saturday GATE Class at LCC Saturdays, Oct 24-Nov 21 (East Campus)

Carol is teaching two special classes for gifted/talented students.

TOY STORIES (2nd-3rd Grade): Students will develop an understanding of how energy, force, simple machines and motion work together. Participants will explore how electricity, magnetism, and gravity are used in functioning toys.

M.A.D. SKILLZ (6th-9th Grade): Students will step into the emerging field of alternative energy, using math science, and engineering skills to plan and construct a system for converting kinetic energy into electrical energy (a generator run on pedal power!) and a solar cooker.

Visit www.lcc.edu/SeriousFun or call LCC at 483-1415 to enroll.

Competitive C-Footprint Shrinkage

It will always be a work in progress, but, spurred by our concern for the health and livability of the planet, we continue to be vigilant of opportunities and strategies to lower our personal carbon footprint, and, in so doing, hopefully inspire others to do the same. Recent feedback is demonstrating that our efforts are making a difference...



Our zoo of Michigan native reptiles & amphibians daily requires many collective hours of incandescent light usage.

Twenty-seven years ago we moved into quite the formidable old, poorly-insulated, oil-heated, energy-sucker of an edifice. But then, after packing on extra insulation, converting to geothermal heating, and cutting back incrementally on a variety of electrical appliances and devices in favor of less energy-dependent alternatives the results are paying off.

DTE Energy emails a monthly energy report that includes a bar graph of electrical consumption over the past month compared to (1) our neighbors and (2) our “energy efficient” neighbors. For years our monthly kilowatt-hour usage hovered on the high end of our regular neighbors’ usage. We were certainly not pleased with that status, however, we could feel somewhat better about our consumption knowing that our living space was more than a mere residence. It also housed a functioning business, including a bona fide zoo, with all its own electrical requirements. However, over the last couple of years we’ve still managed to whittle our consumption, drawing our status closer and closer to the coveted “efficient neighbor” plateau.

Hallelujah! Our August consumption of 20.4 kwh/day placed us at 1% better than our energy efficient neighbors. The September report, just in, showed our consumption at 18.9 kwh/day, 10% better than our efficient neighbors! We’re not done yet. In fact, we’re inclined to become energy-efficiency competitive. Do I hear 20%?

More links for your perusal...

<http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/cross-check/climate-change-facts-versus-opinions/>

<http://www.economist.com/news/international/21669885-climate-talks-paris-later-year-negotiators-should-ponder-damage-already>

<http://www.climateneutralnow.org/>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/29/us/politics/survey-of-republican-voters-shows-a-majority-believe-in-climate-change.html>

-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