

Seven Ponds Nature Center - 2000 in Review

by Mike Champagne

In 2000, Seven Ponds Nature Center had another successful year as a nature sanctuary, environmental education center, and affiliate of the Michigan Audubon Society. The nature center maintained its usual busy schedule of day-to-day activities for schoolchildren, members, and the general public, with nearly 24,000 people taking part in programs. At the same time, the nature center laid a foundation for the future with the completion of strategic planning.

The center's Board of Directors accepted the Seven Ponds Nature Center Strategic Planning Report at its August Board Meeting. The report included Mission, Values, and Vision Statements for the nature center, as well as information on the center's Lines of Business. The Mission Statement of Seven Ponds was established as follows:

The mission of Seven Ponds Nature Center is to conserve the natural environment of Seven Ponds as a sanctuary for native plants and animals, as a living classroom for environmental education, and as a peaceful retreat for its visitors. The nature center fosters an understanding and appreciation of our natural world and the development of an environmental ethic in the people and communities of Southeast Michigan through education, service as a community resource, and responsible stewardship of Seven Ponds and adjacent lands.

The strategic planning process also identified a number of goals relative to the mission statement. These include improving the natural integrity of Seven Ponds, settling outstanding property issues, improving programs for both children and adults, making improvements in the center's facilities, and continuing our current financial stability. The Strategic Planning Report was the result of many hours of work by staff, the Board of Directors, and other nature center volunteers.

The nature center continued to emphasize environmental education for children during the year, and served nearly 14,000 young people. School classes came out to Seven Ponds for such programs as **Boatmen to Beaver, Stuck in the Muck, What's Bugging You, Native Americans in the Web of Life, and Life in the Prairie**. These programs make use of Seven Ponds excellent natural diversity to convey important ecological concepts. Other school children received such in-classroom programs as **Wild Versus Tame, Exploring Michigan Animals, Predators and Prey, and Energy and You**. These programs bring important conservation issues into the classroom via topics which complement school science studies. Grants from the Four County Community Foundation in Romeo and the Eaton Corporation allowed the center to reach additional schools in 2000.

Summer Field School programs were once again popular, with 230 children taking part in 16 week-long sessions. Sessions titled **PeeWees and Parents, Wee Walkers, Young Explorers, and Junior Naturalists** served children ranging in age from 2 to 15. These children netted insects in the center's fields, studied pond critters in the Seven Ponds wetlands, hiked through the center's tallgrass prairie, and took part in other activities which provide an in-depth look at the natural world. The Junior Naturalists spent their week learning about geology with field trips to a local gravel pit and other glacial formations in Lapeer County.

Members and visitors were treated to a variety of programs in 2000. Presentations on **Nature Photography** (Dave Stimac), **Michigan Bats** (Organization for Bat Conservation), **Michigan Raptors** (Joe Rogers), **Natural History of Reptiles** (Dr. James Gillingham), **National Parks of Utah and Arizona** (Gordon Lonie), **Fly Tying** (Dale Vronch), **Native Americans and the Earth** (Wayne Jackson), and **Project WET** insured a wonderful year of learning. Staff and volunteers added workshops on **Canoeing, Outdoor Living Skills, Honey Bees, Entomology, Wild Edibles, Group Management, and Basketry**. Each season brings a variety of special events to the nature center. The 2000 special events were **Winterfest, Homes for Wildlife, Earth Day/Arbor Day, Lapeer County Birdathon, Heritage Harvest Days, and Birdseed Weekend**. Many additional educational activities were provided by the center's special interest groups: the Friends of Herbs, Astronomy Club, Eastern Michigan Collectors, and the Ewenique Spinners.

Seven Ponds completed four natural history field tours in 2000, traveling to Trinidad and Tobago, the Smoky Mountains, Algonquin Provincial Park, and the Mid-Atlantic Coast. Participants in these trips not only saw a wonderful variety of plants, animals, and landforms, but were also exposed to conservation issues and efforts in other parts of the state, country, and world.

In addition to Seven Ponds' long-range planning and educational activities, the center moved forward on a variety of other fronts. The large dock and teaching platform on the lake near the building was completely rebuilt. Also in 2000, the center replaced several exhibits in the Interpretive Building, continued work on a natural landscaping demonstration at the Director's Residence, removed non-native plants, such as purple loosestrife and autumn olive, from center property, and monitored over 100 nest boxes used by bluebirds, tree swallows, house wrens, and others.

The nature center conducted a number of fundraising events in 2000 including the **Spring Birdathon, Heritage Harvest Days, Birdseed Weekend, Special Gifts, and the Holiday Auction**. These events were all very successful, thanks to lots of hard work and great participation. We won't soon forget, however, the muddy mess in the field used for parking thanks to the three inches of rain on Sunday of Heritage Harvest.

Throughout the year, members and friends of Seven Ponds were kept abreast of the nature center's programs, projects, and fundraising efforts through the quarterly newsletter, *Heron Tracks*. The newsletter also contains articles about natural history and Seven Ponds. This year's articles were: "The Harbinger of Spring, Part II" (bluebirds), "Osprey Comeback", "Leave it to Beavers", and "Life in the Dormant-tory" (winter dormancy).

As always, the people of Seven Ponds really came through during the year. Our staff of eleven (full and part time) worked very hard, often putting in extra effort during busy seasons or before special events. The nature center again received thousands of hours from hundreds of volunteers. The Assistant Naturalists (ASNATS), women's auxiliary (Stingers), Board of Directors, and others contributed many hours of time in education, habitat management, trail and garden maintenance, clerical work, fundraising, and governance. Our special thanks to each and every one for helping to guide Seven Ponds into the new century.