

The Year in Review - 2008

Introduction

In 2008, Seven Ponds Nature Center celebrated its 42nd anniversary as a nature sanctuary, environmental education center, and peaceful retreat, serving Southeast Michigan. It was an extraordinary year. The nature center continued its longtime commitment to conservation and education with a busy schedule of stewardship activities and a variety of educational programs for schoolchildren, members, and the general public. At the same time, the nature center took a giant leap forward in its strategic plan to improve its facility by renovating the building, constructing a building addition, and improving parking.

The Capital Project and Campaign

Seven Ponds has recognized the need to improve its facilities for many years and included this goal in its 2000 and 2007 Strategic Plans. The center has been laying the foundation for a capital project and campaign for many years. In late 2005, the board, staff, and volunteers began to take an in-depth look at this possibility with the help of a consultant who specializes in nature center planning, buildings, and exhibits. This led to preliminary drawings for the project. In late 2006, Seven Ponds hired an architect to take these drawings to the next stage. Staff, board, volunteers, and committees spent much of 2007 discussing and revising drawings for a building addition, improvements to our existing structure, and an enlarged parking lot. The renovated building was to be named the Schemm-Naish Interpretive Building, recognizing the nature center's founders; Rip and Patty Schemm and Don and Bee Naish. By the end of 2007, a schematic drawing for the project had been developed and the Board of Directors voted to move forward with the plan. Through the first part of 2008, the staff, architect, and project manager completed construction drawings. The drawings included many green construction elements, a result of staff research and consultation with an architect specializing in green building. The center then received approval from Dryden Township and other local authorities, and the project was ready to move forward.

In conjunction with plans for facility improvement, the Board of Directors, staff, and volunteers began developing a strategy for the capital campaign needed to raise funds for the project. Much of 2007 was spent consulting with professional fundraisers, researching funding sources, and developing materials for the campaign. Late in the year, the Board of Directors approved a capital campaign goal of \$1.8 million, the largest such campaign ever attempted by the nature center. It included funds to complete the project, as well as monies to endow the completed facility. Several very generous lead donors came forward to get the campaign started and board members held receptions to solicit funds from selected donors. Board and staff members all contributed to the campaign. By June of 2008, the center had reached seventy percent of the campaign goal in gifts and pledges and the campaign was announced to the Seven Ponds membership and the general public. With generous grants from the Lapeer County Community Foundation and the Four County Community Foundation, plus many additional individual contributions, the Board of Directors voted to proceed with the first phase of construction in the fall of 2008. A groundbreaking for the capital project was held on October 14th, with founders Patty Schemm and Bee Naish attending. By the end of 2008, the building shell was largely up and work was proceeding on many fronts.

Education

Amidst the many hours spent on the capital project and campaign, the nature center continued its dedication to environmental education for children during 2008. Children from preschool age and up came out to Seven Ponds to learn about the natural world using the center's woodlands, fields, ponds, and prairie. They came from public and private schools, home schools, and scout programs. Some children received in-classroom presentations through the center's Traveling Naturalist program. Many area young people also attended the center's Summer Field School program, coming out to the center for in-depth activities throughout the summer. All of these programs exposed students to the wonders of the natural environment, complemented school science curriculums, and helped raise the awareness of the young people taking part in the activities. The nature center served over 7,000 young people during 2008. This was down significantly from 2007. Schools continued to experience significant budget constraints which limited funds for field trip fees and transportation. Most schools restricted the number of field trips for their classes, or eliminated field trips altogether.

Members and visitors were treated to a variety of programs in 2008. The winter season saw the coming of our very popular **Winterfest**, a day of ice skating, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and winter nature study. Then, the Winter Lecture Series brought presentations titled **Hawaii: Islands of Desert and Rain**, **Costa Rica - A Natural History Experience**, **Proud to Work: A History of Michigan's Civilian Conservation Corps**, **Bats of the World**, and **Adventures in Alaska**. Spring is probably the busiest season at the nature center. The season featured **Encountering Animals in the Wild: Raptors and More**, **Fly Tying Demonstration**, **Arnold's Sugar Bush Tour**, **Build a Birdhouse**, **Salamander Foray**, **Owl Prowl**, **Picnic/Market Basket Workshop**, **Curious Canoers**, **An Earth Day Celebration**, and **Spring Bird Walks**. When summer arrived, it was time for such programs as **Family Fun: Pond Dipping**, **Make a Bird Nesting House**, **Butterfly Count**, **Evening Prairie Walk**, **Family Night Hike**, **Golf Cart Tours**, **Hummingbird Travelogue**, and another session of **Curious Canoers**. Fall rounded out the year with programs titled **The Results of Breeding Bird Atlas II**, **A Fall Family Night Hike**, **Fall Bird Walks**, **Natural Wreath Workshop**, **Birdseed Weekend**, **Prairie Seed Collecting Day**, and a fall color version of **Curious Canoers**. Many additional educational activities were provided by the center's special interest groups: **Friends of Herbs**, **Butterfly Gardeners**, **Astronomy Club**, **Eastern Michigan Collectors**, **SPNC Birding Club**, **Seven Ponds Hiking Club**, and the **Beekeepers' Club**. Sunday walks at 2:00 p.m. for members and the general public were offered on alternate weekends.

Seven Ponds completed three natural history field tours in 2008. In mid April, the center offered the **South Florida Birding Tour**. This tour began in the Dry Tortugas off of Key West where the group saw such species as brown noddy, black noddy, and Audubon's shearwater. The land portion of the trip took participants to the Keys, Everglades, Corkscrew Swamp, and other well known birding locations. In June, the center traveled to northern Michigan for the **Copper Harbor and Isle Royale Sojourn**. Participants were able to explore many areas of the Keewenaw Peninsula and then traveled across Lake Superior by boat to Isle Royale National Park. They enjoyed four days of hiking, birding, botanizing, and more. In August, birdwatchers took part in the **Birding Tour to Southeast Arizona: Hummingbirds and More**. The group visited all of the area's hotspots, including Madera Canyon, Patagonia Lake State Park, the Huachuca Mountains, and the Chiricahua

Mountains. The group saw a variety of species, including Montezuma quail, spotted owl, red-faced warbler, and a dozen species of hummingbirds. Participants in the field tours not only enjoyed the special natural features of the locations visited, but were also exposed to conservation issues and efforts in other parts of the United States.

Throughout the year, members and friends of Seven Ponds also received information about the natural world and the nature center's programs through the quarterly newsletter, *Heron Tracks*. Titles of this year's lead articles were: "**Songs in the Air,**" "**Lessons Under Logs,**" "**Chemical Communication,**" and "**Wildlife Watching at Seven Ponds.**" The newsletter also provided information on the center's projects, volunteers, and fundraising efforts.

Buildings and Grounds

While the building addition and renovation project took center stage in matters relating to buildings and grounds during the year, a great deal of progress was made on other fronts as well. Many hours were spent keeping the miles of trails at Seven Ponds and nearby Jonathan Woods in good shape, with mowing, wood chipping, trimming, and boardwalk maintenance. Land management efforts continued in the North-80 with seasonal mowing and brush removal, providing habitat for such species as eastern bluebird, tree swallow, and American woodcock. Work on invasive plants around the nature center continued with work days devoted to removal of autumn olive, purple loosestrife, garlic mustard, dame's rocket, and Oriental bittersweet. Many additional native wildflowers, shrubs, and trees were also added to the Woodland Wildflower Area. The plants in this feature are thriving since a fence was put up to exclude deer two years ago. As in past years, over 100 nest boxes used by bluebirds, tree swallows, house wrens, and other hole nesters were monitored by staff and volunteers. Reproductive success has increased since predator guards were placed below nest boxes, and additional guards were installed in 2008.

Finances and Fundraising

The nature center's annual budget results continued to be affected by the state of the economy in Southeast Michigan and beyond. Contributions, special event proceeds, program fees, bookstore sales, and interest on savings were all down compared to 2007. In addition, fundraising for the capital campaign likely affected regular fundraising efforts. The staff worked very hard to maximize income, while at the same time keeping expenses down. A full breakdown of 2008 finances can be found later in this report.

The nature center conducted a number of fundraising events in 2008 including the **Used Book Sale, Lapeer County Birdathon, Wildflower Sale, Stingers Rummage Sale, Summer Picnic, Heritage Harvest Days, Birdseed Weekend with Stingers Bake Sale, Special Gifts,** and the **Holiday Auction.** Staff and volunteers worked very hard to put on these events and most went as planned. Unfortunately, two days of rain reduced attendance, exhibitors, and proceeds at the annual Heritage Harvest Days in September.

Staff and Volunteers

As always, the people of Seven Ponds were an important part of the center's success. The staff of eight (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, Stingers, Board of Directors, Friends of Seven Ponds,** and others contributed many hours of time for education, habitat

management, trail and garden maintenance, clerical work, fundraising, and governance. In a typical year, approximately 500 people volunteer at the nature center.

Seven Ponds also networked with the people of a variety of other organizations during the year. The nature center continued as an affiliate of the Michigan Audubon Society and had representatives from the Detroit Audubon Society and five chapters of the Michigan Audubon Society (Genesee, Grosse Pointe, Lapeer, Macomb, Oakland) on the center's Board of Directors. Members of the Master Gardeners assisted with duties in the Butterfly Garden and the center worked with a variety of groups to put on Earth Day programs in Lapeer. Seven Ponds staff also participated in activities of the Upland Hills Ecological Awareness Center, Stewardship Network, Oakland County Wild Ones, and the Flint River Watershed Coalition.