

The Year in Review - 2009

Introduction

In 2009, Seven Ponds Nature Center celebrated its 43rd anniversary as a nature sanctuary, environmental education center, and peaceful retreat, serving Southeast Michigan. It was an extraordinary year as the nature center successfully completed an ambitious building renovation plan, as well as the accompanying Capital Campaign required to fund the project. The effort capped off many years of planning and fulfilled a major objective of the center's 2007 Strategic Plan. At the same time, the nature center maintained a busy schedule of stewardship activities and a variety of educational programs for schoolchildren, members, and the general public, thus continuing its longtime commitment to conservation and environmental education.

The Capital Project and Campaign

After an October, 2008 groundbreaking ceremony, the capital project was well on its way by the start of 2009. The building addition was largely roughed in, the parking lot had been formed, geothermal heating and cooling lines had been placed, and work was proceeding on many fronts. With Kirk Construction serving as General Contractor, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, tile layers, drywallers, roofers, painters, heating & cooling contractors, and others took their turn on the project, sometimes under some pretty harsh winter weather conditions. By early May, much of the work on the building addition, housing a reception area, gift shop, restrooms, and multi-purpose room, was complete. The nature center began using this area for school groups and for other programs while workers moved into the existing building to begin renovation activities. The former main room was converted into dedicated exhibit space, and the former restrooms and gift shop were converted into offices. The original 1967 building, known for many years as the "back room" was restored to its original configuration, with much of the work being done in-house. The existing building also received a sprucing up with new paint, carpet, and shingles. Geothermal units were installed in place of the old fuel oil furnaces, creating an all geothermal facility. By August, contractors completed the parking lot, sidewalks, and final grading and their part in the project came to a close. During the remainder of summer and early fall, staff members organized offices, planted grass, built rock walls, installed exhibits, and put up signs. On October 18th, the Grand Opening was held for the Schemm-Naish Interpretive Building with over 100 people attending, including Patty Schemm and Bee Naish and their families.

While work proceeded on the building project, the Board of Directors, volunteers, and staff continued work on the Capital Campaign to raise the needed funds to complete the building project and to add to the center's Endowment Fund. At the start of 2009, the center had received pledges of \$1.4 million toward the \$1.8 million goal. A variety of strategies were utilized to raise additional funds, including grant writing, a second mailing to the center's membership, and personal appeals. Unfortunately, many foundations were not in a position to provide grants for the project due to the economic downturn. The center was pleased to receive a generous bequest from one of its longtime members which gave the Capital Campaign a much needed boost. In early October, Seven Ponds reached the \$1.8 million goal, with a pledge by the Stingers putting the effort over the top. This was just in time for the October Grand Opening for the project.

Education

Amidst the many hours spent on the capital project and campaign, the nature center continued its dedication to environmental education for children during 2009. 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 nearly 7,000 young people during 2009. This number was down significantly from the center's longtime totals. 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 2009. The winter season saw the return 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 **Energize Yourself to Save Energy: Energy Conservation and the Mechanics of Motivation**, **Lords of the Sky**, **Butterflies in Winter**, **Photographing the Galapagos Islands**, and **Canoeing Algonquin's Backcountry**. Spring is probably the busiest season at the nature center. The season featured **Fly Tying Demonstration**, **Arnold's Sugar Bush Tour**, **Invasives 101**, **Family Space Night**, **Botanical Easter Eggs**, **Spring Break Nature Fun**, **Natural Body Care**, **Owl Prowl**, **Salamander Foray**, **An Earth Day Celebration**, **Invasive Plant Workdays**, **Where I'll be in the Spring**, **Curious Canoers**, and **Spring Bird Walks**. When summer arrived, it was time for such programs as **Family Pond Dipping**, **Bats of the World**, **Butterfly Count**, **Nature Photography Workshop**, **Golf Cart Tours**, **The Art of Field Sketching Workshop**, and another session of **Curious Canoers**. Fall rounded out the year with programs titled **Birding Attu**, **One More Tern around the Fort**, **A Fall Family Night Hike**, **Fall Bird Walks**, **Invasive Plant Workdays**, **Birdseed Weekend**, **Prairie Seed Collecting Day**, **Youth Field Sketching**, 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**, and the **Beekeepers' Club**. Sunday walks at 2:00 p.m. for members and the general public were offered on many weekends.

Seven Ponds completed three natural history field tours in 2009. In early May, the center offered **Botany and Birds in Southwestern Michigan**. The group visited this area's nature centers, nature preserves, and state parks to walk through old growth forest, wooded dunes, swamp forest, bog, and prairie. Participants were treated to spectacular carpets of wildflowers, including four types of native trilliums. In June, the center traveled to Ontario for the **Niagara Escarpment Escape**. Participants experienced the unique geology of the Bruce Peninsula and sought a variety of ferns, orchids, and other wildflowers in this area which is well known for its botanical diversity. Also in June, birdwatchers took part in **Birding and Natural History of Trinidad and Tobago**. The group visited the famous Asa Wright Nature Center in Trinidad and the Cuffie River Lodge in Tobago, visiting

tropical rainforests and other tropical habitats in search of the nesting birds of the area. Just sitting on the veranda of Asa Wright Nature Center each morning allowed participants to view a variety of colorful species, including many hummingbirds. A special aspect of this summer tour to the tropics was the chance to view nesting leatherback sea turtles laying eggs on the beach. 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 and the world.

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: "**Cost of Living,**" "**A Blast from the Past,**" "**Chemical Control,**" and "**Uncommon Visitors.**" The newsletter also provided information on the center's projects, volunteers, and fundraising efforts. A variety of information about Seven Ponds and its activities was also available on the nature center's website, www.sevenponds.org.

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. Violent storms caused damage in several areas during the summer. High winds brought down about a dozen large trees in Paul's Woods. It took an entire morning to clear the trails and it will be some time before this area of the woods recovers. Heavy rainstorms caused significant flooding and washed out a section of the boardwalk leading to the A-frame Bridge. Staff members worked on replacing this section and were able to get it completed prior to the fall festival. Additional work will have to be done on the boardwalk in 2010. 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, saw-toothed sunflower, and Oriental bittersweet. 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, starting in 2008. In addition, an osprey platform was erected on Little Pond as part of an Eagle Scout project for the son of one of our members

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. In addition, fundraising for the capital campaign affected the center's regular fundraising efforts for the General Account. As a result, income was down compared to previous years. The nature center maintained staff and program levels of recent years and this resulted in expenses similar to those years. The net result was that the center finished the year in the red, despite the fact that the staff worked very hard to maximize income and keep expenses down. A full breakdown of 2009 finances can be found later in this report.

The nature center conducted a number of fundraising events in 2009 including the **Lapeer**

County Birdathon, Wildflower Sale, Stingers Rummage Sale, 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 Board, volunteers, and staff were very pleased to have two wonderful days of weather for 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. This was especially true in 2009 with the building project and Capital Campaign taking place. The nature center again received thousands of hours from hundreds of volunteers. The **Assistant Naturalists, Stingers, Friends of Herbs, Butterfly Gardeners, Board of Directors**, 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 others.