

## The Year in Review – 2011

### Introduction

2011 was an extraordinary year at Seven Ponds Nature Center. Shortly after the start of the year, the nature center was informed that it was the recipient of a very generous bequest from a longtime member. This contribution not only eased the impact of the ongoing recession on the nature center, but also allowed Seven Ponds to complete several important projects and strengthen its financial foundation for the future. The year also finished off on a high note, when another generous contribution resulted in the addition of 18 acres of land to the nature center's holdings, bringing the total to 486 acres.

The nature center continued its important work as a nature sanctuary, environmental education center and peaceful retreat. As always, the nature center maintained a busy schedule of stewardship activities and a variety of educational programs for schoolchildren, members, and the general public. Meanwhile, the Board of Directors took on additional tasks related to the nature center's separation from the Michigan Audubon Society, including revising trust documents, preparing a separation agreement, and revising the center's bylaws, Articles of Incorporation, and personnel handbook.

### Education

The nature center continued its dedication to environmental education for children during 2011. 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. This included "Field School Specials" for children wishing to learn about advanced topics. In addition, a new program titled "Knee-high Naturalists" began for three and four year olds. All of these programs exposed students to the wonders of the natural environment, complemented school science curriculums, and helped raise the awareness of young people taking part in the activities. The nature center served over 7,500 children during 2011. This number was down a bit from 2010 and down significantly from the center's longtime average annual totals. Schools continued to experience significant budget constraints which limited funds for field trip fees and transportation. Most area schools have restricted the number of field trips for their classes, or eliminated field trips altogether. The nature center once again applied for and received a grant from the Four County Community Foundation and this provided funding for classes from seven local school districts to come out to Seven Ponds on field trips.

Members and visitors were treated to a variety of programs in 2011. 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 **Digging into Dinosaurs, Skulls and Bones, Spring on the Yukon Delta: Waterbird Paradise, Michigan's Racerunner**, and **StarLab**. The season also featured a **Snowshoe Making Workshop** with participants making their own Huron style snowshoes and a **Picnic/Market Basket Making Workshop**. Spring is always the busiest time at the nature center. The season featured **Maple Sugar Magic, Collections Open House, Begin to Carve, Geology Field Trip, Owl Prowls, Weave a Birdhouse**

**Workshop, Evening Paddle on the Ponds, Salamander Forays, Wild Lapeer - An Earth Day Celebration, Invasive Plant Workdays, Curious Canoers, and Spring Bird Walks.** The special event of the season was **Naturefest**, which featured talks about moths, nocturnal adaptations, and astronomy, as well as a native plant sale and photography contest. When summer arrived, it was time for such programs as **Warbler Wander, Family Fun: Pond Dipping, Invasive Plant Removal Days, Butterfly Count, Nature Photography Workshop, Golf Cart Tours, Seven Ponds Sketchers,** and another session of **Curious Canoers.** Fall rounded out the year with programs titled **Drawing from Nature: A Botanical Drawing Workshop, Family Nature Day, Evening Paddle on the Ponds, Fall Bird Walks, Invasive Plant Workdays, Prairie Seed Collecting Day, Night Time Senses, Holiday Vine Wreath Workshop, Cultivating the Wonder of Nature in Childhood,** and a fall color version of **Curious Canoers.** Fall special events were **Heritage Harvest Days** and **Birdseed Saturday.** 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, Beekeepers' Club,** and **Photography Club.** Sunday walks at 2:00 p.m., for members and the general public, were offered on many weekends.

Seven Ponds completed two natural history field tours in 2011. In mid-April, the center offered **The Great Colorado "Chicken" Trip with Friends.** The tour took participants to locations throughout the state of Colorado to find such species as Greater Prairie Chicken, Lesser Prairie Chicken, Greater Sage Grouse, Gunnison Sage Grouse, and Sharp-tailed Grouse. Group members were treated to the sights and sounds of these birds doing their spring courtship dances. Participants also enjoyed a variety of western songbirds. In June, The nature center returned with a group to Michigan's North Country with the **Isle Royale Natural History Tour.** The group spent several days exploring the Keweenaw Peninsula and then traveled by boat to Isle Royale National Park. Participants learned about the area's unique geology and cultural history, and enjoyed many northern birds and wildflowers. A special part of the trip was a visit with wolf biologist Rolf Peterson. Participants in the above 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: **"Bears of the Underworld," "Carpenter of the Woods," "Satellite Moon,"** and **"Faceless Predators of the Bog."** The newsletter also provided information on the center's projects, volunteers, and fundraising efforts. A variety of information about Seven Ponds and its activities continued to be available on the nature center's website, [www.sevenponds.org](http://www.sevenponds.org). New in 2011, members of the community were able to "like the nature center" at [www.facebook.com/SevenPondsNatureCenter](http://www.facebook.com/SevenPondsNatureCenter).

### **Buildings and Grounds**

A number of large projects were taken on during 2011. The A-Frame Bridge, an important Seven Ponds trail feature, once again needed repairs. The bridge was completely disassembled and rebuilt using large treated beams and lumber. Much work was also done on the two homes at the nature center. The foundation of the Farmhouse was excavated strengthened, and sealed. The Director's Residence received a new roof. The exteriors of both homes were also painted.

Staff and volunteers also made progress on a variety of other tasks related to buildings and grounds. Many hours were spent keeping the miles of trails at Seven Ponds and nearby Jonathan Woods in good shape, with mowing, wood chipping, tree clearing, 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. As in past years, over 100 nest boxes used by bluebirds, tree swallows, house wrens, and other cavity nesters were monitored by staff and volunteers. In addition to the above work, a new section of trail was added at Jonathan Woods, creating a loop trail in the northeast part of the preserve.

### **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. As a result, the center continued to struggle on some levels. Fortunately, the bequest at the beginning of the year gave the finances a much needed boost. 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 black and was also able to add significant amounts to both the Endowment and Reserve Funds. Growth of these funds will help provide increased income during 2012 and beyond. A full breakdown of the 2011 finances can be found later in this report.

The nature center conducted a number of fundraising events in 2011 including the **Lapeer County Birdathon, Native Plant Sale, Stingers Rummage Sale, Heritage Harvest Days, Birdseed Saturday with Stingers Bake Sale, Special Gifts,** and the **Holiday Auction**. Staff and volunteers worked very hard to put on these events and all went well. In addition, most of the outstanding pledges from the Capital Campaign came in. The \$1.8 million campaign finished with less than \$3,000.00 in unfulfilled pledges.

### **Staff and Volunteers**

As always, the people of Seven Ponds were an important part of the center's success. The staff of ten (four full and six 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, 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. Members of the center's various special interest clubs also helped with education programs and special events. 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 its association with 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, and 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.