

# Seven Ponds Nature Center - The Year in Review - 2013

## Introduction

During 2013, Seven Ponds Nature Center continued its longtime mission of serving Southeast Michigan as a nature sanctuary, environmental education center, and peaceful retreat. The nature center's 47<sup>th</sup> year of operation saw a busy schedule of stewardship activities and a variety of educational programs for schoolchildren, members, and the general public. It was an eventful year, with progress on many fronts related to the nature center's mission. There were new sources of support for schools to come out on field trips, stepped-up efforts to control invasive species, a second year of tree planting around the Interpretive Building, new costumed characters for the Enchanted Woodland program, building improvements, a new e-newsletter, and creation of a full color brochure for educators about the nature center's programs for children. It was also a time of transition for the Seven Ponds family with the departure of several staff members and the passing of one of the nature center's founders, Bee Naish.

## Stewardship

During its 47 year history, Seven Ponds has carefully nurtured the land which makes up the nature center. The natural features found in pristine areas of the property have been preserved. Other portions of the property, once the plowed fields of a large farm, have been transformed into meadows, woodlands, and prairie by the center's efforts. Nature center staff and volunteers continued this tradition during 2013, working to maintain the integrity of the center's natural communities and to improve their diversity. Fields near the parking lot, in the North-80, and at the Richie Pond Preserve were mowed to maintain habitat for plant and animal species which require open areas. More than 100 bird houses were placed in these fields for eastern bluebirds, tree swallows, house wrens, and chickadees. Additional nest boxes were erected in woodland and wetland areas for wood ducks and eastern screech owls and all of the existing boxes were cleaned and repaired where needed.

2013 was also the second year of an ambitious tree planting project, designed to improve the woodland around the Interpretive Building. A grove of 28 non-native conifer trees were first removed from the area just east of the building. These were subsequently replaced by 40 native upland trees species, including burr oak, white oak, scarlet oak, ironwood, and basswood. An additional 20 trees were planted in the forest near the cedar swamp to replace ash trees lost to emerald ash borer. These included silver maple, swamp white oak, Michigan holly, and speckled alder. Wire cages were placed around all of these trees to protect them against deer damage. Three specimen trees, flowering dogwood, pagoda dogwood, and Washington hawthorn were added to the bird-friendly landscaping in front of the building. Finally, deer resistant native wildflowers and ferns were planted in the woodland area between the building and the lake, at the base of trees planted in 2012. Several garden clubs and many individuals contributed to the above effort through the summer Buy-A-Tree Campaign.

As with most other natural areas, nature preserves, and state and national parks, Seven Ponds continues to be impacted by non-native, invasive plant species. The nature center received a grant from the Lapeer County Community Foundation which allowed us to increase our efforts to control these aggressive plants during 2013. Wildtype Native Plant

Nursery of Mason, Michigan was contracted to work on populations of garlic mustard and Japanese barberry at Jonathan Woods. Nature center staff and volunteers worked on garlic mustard, glossy buckthorn, Oriental bittersweet, autumn olive, dame's rocket, and purple loosestrife in areas adjacent to the building, in the North-80, and around the lakes. Much of this work was done on the numerous **Invasive Plant Workdays** scheduled spring through fall and conducted by Naturalist Carrie Spencer. Together, these activities resulted in the most comprehensive treatment of these plants during any single year to date.

## **Education**

The nature center continued its dedication to environmental education for children during 2013. 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 organizations to take part in **Seasonal Walks, Explorer Programs, 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 again included **Field School Specials** for children wishing to learn about advanced topics. In addition, **Knee-high Naturalists**, for three and four year olds continued through the year. 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 8,300 children with programs during 2013. This number was up by over 1,100 children, compared to 2012, but still more than 1,400 below the nature center's 20 year average. Schools continued to experience significant budget constraints which limit funds for field trip fees and transportation. Most area school systems have restricted the number and/or nature of field trips for their schools, or eliminated field trips altogether. In addition, the numbers of students who are attending schools served by the nature center have dropped significantly during recent years. In light of these circumstances, the nature center's school visitation numbers for the year were encouraging. The nature center's efforts once again received a boost from a grant from the Four County Community Foundation which provided funding for classes from seven local school districts to come out to Seven Ponds on field trips. This grant also funded the creation of a full-color brochure which describes all of the nature center's programs for children. This brochure was distributed to educators in the fall of 2013. In addition, the Lapeer Kiwanis Club and the Lapeer Optimist Club made contributions which allowed students from the Lapeer Community Schools, Chatfield School, Bishop Kelly Catholic School, and St. Paul's Lutheran School, all in Lapeer, to come out to the nature center on field trips.

Members and visitors were treated to a variety of programs in 2013. The winter season saw the return of our very popular **Winterfest**, a day of ice skating, ice-cutting, snowshoeing, horse-drawn sleigh rides, crafts, and winter nature study. Then, the Winter Lecture Series brought presentations titled **Creautre Feature, Utah's Canyonlands, Kirtland's Warbler: An Extraordinary Bird, Extraordinary People, Controversial Coyote, and Bosque, Barnegat, & Bethel: A Photographer Adrift**. The season also featured a **Hard Shell Gourds Workshop** with participants making their own gourd art, a **Photography Workshop**, and **Winter Bird Walks**. Spring is always a busy time at the nature center. The season featured **Botanical Easter Eggs, Saginaw Bay Birding, Owl Prowls, Salamander**

**Forays, Build Your Own Tufa Toad Abode, Curious Canoers, and Spring Bird Walks.** The special event of the season was **Naturefest**, which featured talks about bluebirds, bats, and landscaping using native prairie plants, as well as a native plant sale, nature crafts, pond dipping, and frog walks. A special feature of the season was an exhibit titled **Fossils of the Michigan Basin** which was housed at the nature center for several months. When summer arrived, it was time for such programs as **Arkona Field Trip, Solstice Night Hike, Butterfly Count, Family Fun: Pond Dipping, Fern Day, Paper Making Craft, Netting Summer Insects, Golf Cart Tours, Pond Adventures, Jonathan Woods Wander, Build a Hypertufa Leaf Birdbath, Summer Bird Walks**, and another session of **Curious Canoers**. Fall rounded out the year with **Fall Bird Walks, Golf Cart Tours, Prairie Seed Collecting Day, a Flying Wild Workshop**, and a fall color version of **Curious Canoers**. September and October are a busy time for special events. The 37<sup>th</sup> annual **Heritage Harvest Days** went very well, despite some rainfall on the Sunday of the festival. This year, children 12 and under were admitted without charge. Other fall special events were **Birdseed Saturday** and the 2<sup>nd</sup> annual **Enchanted Woodland**. For this last program, families explored the nighttime forest, learning about nocturnal animals from staff and volunteers in costumes along the trail. New characters for the year were a skunk and an opossum fabricated by our own Naturalist, Lois Rheume.

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 2013. In mid-March, the center offered the **Morro Bay Birding Tour**. Leaders and participants explored the Pacific shoreline and inland areas near Morro Bay, California to find a variety of western shorebirds, waterfowl, and land birds. Highlights included Allen's hummingbird, yellow-billed magpie, red-throated loon, Bell's sparrow, and more. In July, the nature center took a **Pike's Peak Region Birding Tour**, visiting grassland to glacier locations near Colorado Springs. Bird highlights for the trip included Williamson's sapsucker, ferruginous hawk, mountain plover, sage thrasher, blue grosbeak, and many other western species. In addition, the group was treated to a variety of beautiful western wildflowers, including many alpine species observed on the top of Pike's Peak. 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 North America.

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*, produced by Office Manager Dan Hayes. Titles of this year's lead articles were: **"Feathers"** by Nancy Kautz, **"Five Prairie Plants for Your Garden"** by Layne Brown, and **"Kids Say the Darndest Things"** by Lois Rheume, and **"In Memory of Bee Naish"** by Mike Champagne. 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 center's website, [www.sevenponds.org](http://www.sevenponds.org), and people could also like us on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/SevenPondsNatureCenter](http://www.facebook.com/SevenPondsNatureCenter). The nature center also introduced a new monthly e-newsletter, *The Great Blue Heron*, which was sent out to both members of the nature center and to non-members, starting in

September of the year.

### **Buildings and Grounds**

2013 will be remembered as a year of numerous violent storms. A December ice storm covered the nature center's trees with a beautiful, but destructive, coat of ice which arrived overnight. On the morning after, the air was filled with loud cracking sounds as trees and branches shattered under the weight of ice and came crashing down. The nature center's buildings were without power for nearly a week. 2013 also saw several strong wind storms which wreaked havoc on the nature center's trees, including one of the large white oaks in front of the farmhouse near the front gate. This old beauty toppled over during the night, causing significant damage to the 19<sup>th</sup> century home. As a result, the farmhouse required new siding, roof repairs, and gutter replacement. Some much needed insulation was added to the home as repairs were made. Many trees came down across trails during the year's storms and many hours were required to make them usable.

Staff and volunteers also worked hard during the year on many regular 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.

### **Finances and Fundraising**

The nature center's annual finances continued to be affected by the state of the economy in Southeast Michigan and beyond during 2013. Board and staff worked hard to maintain income levels, however, and was able to maintain staff and program levels similar to recent years and finish the year with a small surplus. A full breakdown of the 2013 finances can be found later in this report.

The nature center conducted a number of fundraising events in 2013 including the **Lapeer County Birdathon, Native Plant Sale, Stingers Rummage Sale, Buy-A-Tree, 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.

### **Staff and Volunteers**

As always, the people of Seven Ponds were an important part of the center's success. The staff of eleven (four full time and seven seasonal or part time) worked very hard, often putting in extra effort during busy seasons or before special events. Maintenance Man Steve Ormiston retired from his position after six great years of taking care of buildings, grounds, equipment, and the needs of staff and volunteers. Part-time Naturalist Layne Brown also left the staff for a full time position at another Southeast Michigan nature center. We wish them both well. Joining the staff during 2013 were Maintenance Man Jay Chase and Weekend Receptionist Rebecca Steketee.

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.

The nature center will forever remember Seven Ponds Nature Center founder and super volunteer, Bee Naish, who passed away in October. Bee helped get the nature center started during the mid-1960's and played a major role in the nature center's development over the past nearly five decades. Bee served as the nature center's volunteer librarian, led programs for children as an Assistant Naturalist, was an active member of the Stingers, helped create Heritage Harvest Days, and helped with many day-to-day activities of the nature center. She was an artist, birdwatcher, and naturalist who dedicated much of her life to Seven Ponds. The nature center's library will be dedicated in her memory in May of 2014.

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 (MAS) and had representatives from Detroit Audubon Society and five chapters of MAS (Genesee, Grosse Pointe, Lapeer, Macomb, and Oakland) on the center's Board of Directors.