

# Seven Ponds Nature Center - The Year in Review - 2014

## Introduction

Seven Ponds Nature Center had another successful year in 2014, continuing its longtime mission of serving Southeast Michigan as a nature sanctuary, environmental education center, and peaceful retreat. It was an eventful year, with progress on many fronts related to the nature center's mission. It was an active year for stewardship, and the nature center's natural communities benefited from many hours of invasive plant removal and tree planting by staff and volunteers. Thousands of school children once again came out to Seven Ponds for field trips, with many of these programs made possible thanks to generous support from the community. The nature center also offered a busy schedule of walks, workshops, field trips, club meetings, and field tours to members and the general public. The programs provided environmental education activities for all ages and interests. At year end, the center began a project to renovate the oldest portion of the building into a more useful space for classes, wildlife watching, club activities, and collections storage.

## Stewardship

During its 48 year history, Seven Ponds has carefully nurtured the land which makes up the nature center. As a result, the nature center is a living textbook of the natural communities found in Southeast Michigan. Nature center staff and volunteers continued this stewardship tradition during 2014, working to maintain the integrity of the center's natural communities and to improve their diversity. Fields near the parking lot and in the North-80 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 black-capped chickadees. These houses were monitored on a weekly basis during spring and summer by staff and volunteers. Additional nest boxes for wood ducks and eastern screech owls, put up in past years, continued to provide nesting sites for these species. Three additional nest boxes for eastern screech owls were erected near the Woodland Wildflower Area as part of an Eagle Project by Aaron Thompson of Boy Scout Troop #128 in Almont. Girl Scout Troop #13180, also of Almont, erected a chimney swift tower next to the Interpretive Building to provide a nesting site for chimney swifts in the future.

2014 was the third year of an ambitious tree planting project, designed to improve the woodland around the Interpretive Building and create a "Forest of the Future." More than 100 new native trees and shrubs were planted during the year. Many were planted through an Eagle Project by Andrew Mclocklin of Boy Scout Troop #128 in Almont. This scout organized a series of work days which saw scouts, parents, and others removing non-native plants and planting 75 trees. The species planted included burr oak, white oak, black oak, red oak, ironwood, yellow birch, bitternut hickory, and basswood. Wire cages were placed around all of these trees to protect them against deer damage. In addition, the nature center obtained 50 American beech trees for planting in Paul's Woods and in the woodland adjacent to the building. Five specimen trees, four sugar maple and one red oak, were also planted in the parking lot islands to provide shade for parkers, fall color for visitors, and nesting trees for birds.

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. Wildtype Native Plant

Nursery of Mason, Michigan was again contracted to work on populations of garlic mustard and Japanese barberry at Jonathan Woods. Nature center staff and volunteers worked on garlic mustard, multiflora rose, glossy buckthorn, honeysuckle, Oriental bittersweet, autumn olive, Canada thistle, dame's rocket, and purple loosestrife in areas adjacent to the building, in the North-80, in Earl's Prairie, and around the lakes. Much of this work was done on the numerous **Invasive Plant Workdays** scheduled spring through fall and conducted by Naturalists Cathy Wesley and Carrie Spencer. During one of the workdays, 25 Chrysler Corporation employees came out to help remove invasive plants through the company's Motor City Citizens Program. The above mentioned Eagle Project by Aaron Thompson also removed a large number of woody invasive plants from the area near the Woodland Wildflower Area. Together, the above activities resulted in the most comprehensive treatment of invasive plants at the nature center during any single year to date.

The many forms of support for stewardship activities during the year were much appreciated. Several garden clubs and many individuals contributed to these efforts through the summer Buy-A-Tree Campaign. In addition, the nature center received a generous grant from the Lapeer County Community Foundation which funded invasive species work and planting of American beech trees. The nature center also received a financial contribution from one of the Eagle Scout Projects and from the Chrysler Corporation's Motor City Citizens Program.

### **Education**

The nature center continued its dedication to environmental education for children during 2014. 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 of the area's 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 8,125 children with programs during 2014. This number was down slightly from 2013, though numbers for field trips to the nature center were up by a small margin. Schools continued to experience significant budget constraints which limited funds for field trip fees and transportation. Most area school systems have restricted the number of field trips for their schools, or eliminated field trips altogether. In addition, the numbers of students attending most schools served by the nature center continue to be lower than they were during most of the center's history. As a result, scheduling programs for children continued to be a challenge in 2014. Fortunately, Seven Ponds had several partners to help give its efforts a boost. The nature center once again received 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 a teacher workshop and staff and teacher training for a new program for school children called Annie's Big Nature Lesson. This program will be held for the first time at Seven Ponds in the spring of 2015. In

addition, the Kiwanis Club of Lapeer 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 during 2014. Each season brought new things to learn and new things to experience. The seasons unfolded as follows:

WINTER - 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 **Environmental Adaptations, Passenger Pigeon, Science Spectacular, Ephraim Williams – Pioneer Fur Trader**, and **Preservation & Action: A Lighthouse Program**. These Sunday afternoon programs were all free to members. The season also featured **Kids' Movie Saturdays, A Night Under the Owl Moon, Winter Bird Walks**, and more.

SPRING - Spring is always the busiest season at the nature center and 2014 was no exception. The season featured **Begin to Carve, Saginaw Bay Birding, Botanical Easter Eggs, Owl Prowl, Salamander Forays, Build Your Own Tufa Toad Abode, Curious Canoers, Spring Bird Walks**, and more. The special event of the season was **Naturefest**, which featured talks about landscaping for birds and native plants in the urban landscape, as well as a native plant sale, nature crafts, pond dipping, and frog walks.

SUMMER - When summer arrives, much of the center's time is devoted to **Summer Field School** for children. There were still many programs for adults and families during 2014, however, including the **Butterfly Count, Family Fun: Pond Dipping, Family Fun: Summer Insects, Golf Cart Tours, Adult Canoe Clinic, Jonathan Woods Wander, Build a Hypertufa Leaf Birdbath, Summer Bird Walks, Curious Canoers**, and more.

FALL - Fall rounded out the year with **Fall Bird Walks, Prairie Seed Collecting Day, Workshops for the Garden, an Aquatic Wild Workshop**, a fall color version of **Curious Canoers** and more. September and October are a busy time for special events. The 38<sup>th</sup> annual **Heritage Harvest Days** went very well, despite some rainfall on Saturday of the festival. This year, children 12 and under were again admitted without charge. New this year was the "Harvest Pub" where attendees could get a glass of beer or wine to go with their meal. Other fall special events were **Birdseed Saturday** and the 3rd 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. A new character this year was a firefly, fabricated by the center's 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 SPNC Camera Club**. Sunday Walks for members and the general public were also offered on most Sundays at 2:00 p.m.

The nature center staff continued to add exhibits to the Discovery Room during the year. Naturalist Cathy Wesley put together a large freshwater aquarium featuring many of the common fish of the lakes and ponds of Seven Ponds. Naturalist Lois Rheume created a

new watershed exhibit which allows visitors to trace the source and destination of the water of lakes, rivers, and streams around their homes. She also created a new exhibit about the nature center's squirrels and added miniature decoys to the existing decoy exhibit.

Seven Ponds completed three natural history field tours in 2014. In mid-March, the center offered the **Morro Bay Birding Tour**. 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 views of Allen's hummingbird, yellow-billed magpie, red-throated loon, and Bell's sparrow. In April, the **Wildflower Wander in Southern Ohio** took participants to the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains to enjoy spring wildflowers, southern birds, and ancient earthworks. One highlight of this trip was a spectacular hillside of dwarf larkspur and Virginia Bluebells. Another was a chance to walk around the mysterious Serpent Mound, one of the largest ancient earthworks in the world. In May, the nature center conducted the **Alaska Birding Tour**. This group traveled to St. Lawrence Island, Nome, and the Kenai Peninsula to see many species of waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls, and songbirds. The group also enjoyed many species of mammals, including humpback whale, musk ox, beluga whale, orca, and grizzly bear. 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 and other staff members. Titles of this year's lead articles were: "**Avian Eponyms**" by Mike Champagne, "**Earl's Prairie**" by Nancy Kautz, "**The Bird and the Berry**" by Carrie Spencer, and "**Natural Journaling: Connecting our Environment to Ourselves**" by Cathy Wesley. The newsletter also provided information on the center's projects, volunteers, and fundraising efforts. A variety of information about Seven Ponds and its activities could be found in digital format in 2014. The center's website, [www.sevenponds.org](http://www.sevenponds.org), managed by Office Manager Dan Hayes, provided many people with an introduction to Seven Ponds. The nature center also stepped up its Facebook presence with Naturalist Carrie Spencer providing regular new material for this page at [www.facebook.com/SevenPondsNatureCenter](http://www.facebook.com/SevenPondsNatureCenter). The nature center continued its monthly e-newsletter, *The Great Blue Heron*, which was sent out to both members and non-members by Executive Director Mike Champagne.

### **Buildings and Grounds**

Staff and volunteers 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. The pond dipping dock in Earl's Prairie was rebuilt so that it would continue to provide a place for children to take part in pond study activities during school field trips and summer programs.

At year end, the center began renovating the small 25 foot by 40 foot building which was built in 1967 and served as the center's original education building. Over the years, the nature center added larger structures to this building and its importance to the center's regular activities diminished. It became known to everyone as "the back room." The renovation, to be finished in 2015, will add insulation, new windows, flooring, window

quilts, restroom vanities, and exterior doors. The renovation will create a very attractive space which can be used for children's programs, adult workshops, club meetings, wildlife observation, and collections storage.

### **Finances and Fundraising**

The nature center's annual finances continued to be affected by the state of the economy in Southeast Michigan during 2014. Board and staff worked hard to maintain income levels, however, and the nature center 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 2014 finances can be found later in this report.

The nature center conducted a number of fundraising events in 2014 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, Used Book Sale**, and the **Holiday Auction**. Staff and volunteers worked very hard to put on these events and all went well. The nature center also received a generous planned gift from one of its longtime supporters. This gift allowed the center to accomplish the building renovation project and also make a significant addition to the Endowment Fund.

### **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 time and six seasonal or part time) worked very hard, often putting in extra effort during busy seasons or before special events. Maintenance Man Jay Chase retired from his position after just one year, and several seasonal or part-time staff members opted to move on to positions elsewhere. Joining the staff during 2014 were Naturalist Cathy Wesley, Maintenance Man Mike Grappin, Weekday Receptionist Karen Page, Summer Maintenance Person Connor Socrates, and Weekend Receptionist Stacey Hollinsworth.

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, 2013. 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 center's volunteer librarian, led programs for children, was a member of the Stingers, helped create Heritage Harvest Days, and assisted with many day-to-day activities of the nature center. She dedicated much of her life to Seven Ponds. The nature center's library was 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.