

# Seven Ponds Nature Center - The Year in Review - 2015

## Introduction

Seven Ponds Nature Center had another successful year in 2015, 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 center's mission. It was an active year for stewardship, with a variety of improvements made to the nature center's natural areas. Thousands of school children once again visited 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. The project to renovate the back room of the nature center into a more useful space for classes, wildlife watching, club activities, and collections storage was a significant facility improvement.

## Stewardship

During its 49 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 their dedication to stewardship during 2015, putting in many hours 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, which were put up in previous years, continued to provide nesting sites for these species. A new addition was the osprey platform which was placed in the North-80 in late spring. This was a cooperative effort by DTE Energy, Osprey Watch of Southeast Michigan, and a local Boy Scout. We'll all be watching this structure in 2016, hoping ospreys move in.



**The new osprey tower in the North-80**

2015 was the fourth year of an ambitious tree planting project, designed to improve the woodland around the Interpretive Building and create a "Forest of the Future." Approximately 75 new native trees and shrubs were planted during the year. Many were planted through an Eagle Scout Project by Caleb Schlanderer of Boy Scout Troop #128 in Almont. Caleb organized a series of work days during October which saw scouts, parents,

and others removing non-native plants and planting 50 trees. The species planted included white oak, black oak, red oak, flowering dogwood, sugar maple, bitternut hickory, American beech, and basswood. In addition, the nature center added a variety of native plants in the parking islands and in the area in front of the building. Plant species included ironwood, red elderberry, American elderberry, Michigan holly, choke cherry, leadplant, and prairie dropseed. A fern and wildflower planting was also created along the back of the building near the bird feeding station outside the library window. This area will provide a place close to the building to enjoy native woodland plants such as maidenhair fern, lady fern, Christmas fern, a variety of wood ferns, jack-in-the-pulpit, green dragon, wild geranium trilliums, wild geranium, Solomon's seal, Virginia waterleaf, violets, and columbine.



**Almont Boy Scouts plant trees**

Non-native, invasive plants continue to have a significant impact on the natural communities of Seven Ponds. Wildtype Native Plant Nursery of Mason, Michigan was again contracted to work on populations of garlic mustard and Japanese barberry at Jonathan Woods. In addition, nature center staff and volunteers worked on at least 15 species of invasive plants, including garlic mustard, 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, 20 Chrysler Corporation employees came out to help remove invasive plants through the company's Motor City Citizens Program. The above mentioned Eagle Project by Caleb Schlanderer also removed a large number of woody invasive plants from the area near the Woodland Wildflower Area. By end of the season, over 660 man-hours had been put in by staff, volunteers, and contractual employees. This resulted in the most comprehensive treatment of invasive plants on nature center lands during any single year to date.



**Naturalist Cathy Wesley & Chrysler volunteers**

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 at Jonathan Woods. The nature center also received a financial contribution from the Eagle Scout Project and from the Chrysler Foundation.

## Education

The nature center continued its dedication to environmental education for children during 2015. 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



**Naturalist Nancy Kautz with a school group**

Dryden 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, attended special training sessions for the program and then all worked together during the week-long program. All of these activities exposed students to the wonders of the natural environment, complemented school science curriculums, and helped raise the awareness of young people taking part.

for in-depth activities throughout the summer. This again included **Field School Specials** for children wishing to learn about advanced topics. **Knee-high Naturalists**, for three and four year olds, was offered monthly throughout the year. The addition of a new program titled "**Annie's BIG Nature Lesson**" provided two classes of 6<sup>th</sup> graders from Dryden Elementary School an opportunity to come out to the nature center for an entire week. Staff naturalists Carrie Spencer and Cathy Wesley, along with two

The nature center served 7,505 children with programs during 2015. This number was down from 2014, with most of the drop coming in the number of children taking part in school field trips, Traveling Naturalist programs, and Knee-High Naturalist sessions. Summer Field School participation and registration in homeschool programs both increased. The addition of Annie's BIG Nature Lesson to the schedule gave numbers a nice boost. Teachers from an additional school system will attend a training session for the program in 2016 and their classes will be scheduled to come out to Seven Ponds in early 2017.

Schools in the nature center's service area continue to be impacted by the financial climate existing in the region. Southeast Michigan began experiencing its own recession in the early 2000's and this worsened with the "Great Recession" which hit the nation in 2008. The

service area is still recovering. As a result, schools continue to experience significant budget constraints which limit funds for field trip fees and transportation. Most local school systems have restricted the number of field trips for their schools, restricted travel distance, 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. To make matters worse, many of the students who remain in the schools are economically disadvantaged. As a result, school administrators and teachers are reluctant to pass along field trip costs to students and their parents. For all of these reasons, getting students out to Seven Ponds on field trips continues to be a challenge.

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 eight 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 Annie's BIG Nature Lesson. 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.



**Naturalist Carrie Spencer with a Lapeer school group**

Members and visitors were treated to a variety of programs during 2015. 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, animal tracking, snowshoeing, crafts, and winter nature study. Then, the Winter Lecture Series brought presentations titled **Made in Michigan, Signs of Insects, Build Your Own Ecosystem, The History of Oakdale**, and **Nature's Superheroes**. These Sunday afternoon programs were all free to members. The season also featured **Home Energy Assessment with Geothermal Heating & Cooling Workshop, Natural Wreath Workshop, Nature Journaling, Snow Moon, Paint-A-Rock Animal, Winter Bird Walks**, and more.

**SPRING** - Spring is always an exciting season at the nature center with many scheduled activities. During 2015, the season featured **Begin to Carve Workshop, Build Your Own Tufa Toad Abode, Canoe Clinic: Canvassing the Wood & Canvas Canoe, Saginaw Bay Birding, Botanical Easter Eggs, Owl Prowl, Salamander Forays, Lapeer Geology Field Trip, Curious Canoers, Nature Journaling, Spring Bird Walks**, and more. The special event of the season was **Eco Days**, which featured a live amphibian and reptile

display, owl pellet dissecting, cooking with garlic mustard, a rain barrel workshop, pond dipping crafts, and programs by many of the nature center's clubs.

SUMMER - When summer arrives, much of the center's time is devoted to **Summer Field School** for children. There were also many programs for adults and families during the season, including the **Butterfly Count, Family Fun Day: Pond Dipping, Family Fun Day: Insect Netting, Golf Cart Tours, Adult Nature Study Classes, Fern Day, Build a Hypertufa Leaf Birdbath, Adult Canoe Clinic, Nature Journaling, Summer Bird Walks, Curious Canoers**, and more. The **Camera Club Photo Expo** was attended by many area photographers.

FALL - Fall rounded out the year with **Fall Bird Walks, Prairie Seed Collecting in Earl's Prairie, Field Trip to Mott Geology Museum, Nature Journaling, Hands-On Nature Teacher Workshop, Natural Ornament Workshop, Curious Canoers** and more.

September and October are a busy time for special events. The 39<sup>th</sup> annual **Heritage Harvest Days** went very well, despite some rainfall and a power outage on Saturday of the festival. This year, children 12 and under were again admitted without charge.

Other fall special events were **Birdseed Saturday** and the 4th 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 coyote, which was fabricated by Naturalist Lois Rheume. The nature now has ten great costumes for the event.



**Naturalist Lois Rheume with the new coyote costume**

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.**

The staff continued to add exhibits in the Interpretive Building during the year. The Capac Public Library donated a collection of 15 live mounts of native birds, all in excellent condition. These were placed throughout the building where they can be viewed by visitors. Several additional live mounts were added to the ever-growing bird exhibit in the Hall of Michigan Birds. At year end, a bright red, Old Town wood and canvas canoe, donated by one of our members, was hung from the ceiling in the Discovery Room. The many exhibits in the building continue to provide a focal point for nature center visitors.

Seven Ponds completed two natural history field tours in 2015. In May, the center conducted the **Southeast Arizona Birding Tour**. The tour took participants to locations

around Tucson to explore deserts, grasslands, oak woodlands, and coniferous forests in search of birds. The spotlight was on night birds during this tour, and the group located a total of nine species of owls and three nightjars. The trip was co-led by Executive Director Mike Champagne. In June, the **Isle Royale – Copper Harbor Sojourn** took participants to the Keweenaw Peninsula in search of boreal wildflowers and birds, and then by boat to Isle Royale National Park in Lake Superior. The group stayed in the comfortable Rock Harbor Lodge and took day trips in search of wildflowers, birds, moose, and more. This tour was led by Seven Ponds naturalists Carrie Spencer and Nancy Kautz. Participants in these two 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.



**Isle Royale participants on Lookout Louise**

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: **"Mycelium Magic"** by Lois Rheume, **"Bird Brain"** by Nancy Kautz, **"The Iconic Wanderer"** by Carrie Spencer, and **"Biodiversity is the Spice of Life"** 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 2015. 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 provided information about its activities on its Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/SevenPondsNatureCenter](http://www.facebook.com/SevenPondsNatureCenter). Naturalist Carrie Spencer and other staff members provided these updates. 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. Improvements were made to all three of the observation towers over the summer. New signs were also placed on two key crossroads near the nature center to help direct visitors to Seven Ponds.

Late in 2014, work began on a renovation of the "back room" of the Interpretive Center. This 25 foot by 40 foot room was the original building when the center opened in 1967. Over the years, as the nature center grew, larger and more attractive rooms were constructed and the old back room took a back seat to the newer facilities. With the help of a generous

planned gift, improvements to this back room were completed in February of 2015. The renovation included improved wall and attic insulation, new windows, flooring, interior siding, window quilts, restroom vanities, and exterior doors. The renovated room provides a very attractive space which can be used for children's programs, adult workshops, club meetings, wildlife observation, and collections storage. Now, staff members all want to use this room when small groups visit the nature center.



**Knee-High Naturalists in the renovated back room**

### **Finances and Fundraising**

The nature center's annual finances continued to be affected by the state of the economy in Southeast Michigan during 2015. 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 2015 finances can be found later in this report.

The nature center conducted a number of fundraising events in 2015 including the **Lapeer County Birdathon, Native Plant Sale, Stingers Rummage Sale, Buy-A-Tree, Heritage Harvest Days, Birdseed Saturday, Stingers Bake Sales, Special Gifts, Used Book Sales**, and the **Holiday Auction**. Staff and volunteers worked very hard to put on these many special events and all went well. The Holiday Auction went particularly well, raising a new high for the 24 year event. Special thanks to the Development Committee.

### **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, three part time, and three seasonal) worked very hard, often putting in extra effort during busy seasons or before special events. With all staff members returning in 2015, there was no need for any new hires during the year. This, along with the long-time tenure of several staff members provides a great deal of stability at the nature center.

The nature center again received thousands of hours of work 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.