



Habitat Happenings

SAVING BIRDS THRU HABITAT NEWSLETTER

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The Power of One Nick and Liz Schroeck's Urban Lawn Conversion

By Nick Schroeck



Schroeck front lawn...before.



Schroeck front lawn...now.

We bought our home on a half-acre lot in Bloomfield Township, Michigan in May of 2010. The yard was a boring canvas of turf grass. Fortunately, the back yard had several different species of pine trees planted along the property line and a couple of big, mature silver maple trees along one side. The landscaping was minimal; just day lilies and evergreen shrubs.

First, we replaced the grass in the middle of the circle drive with native nanny bush, serviceberry, nine bark, and pagoda dogwood, purchased from a local native plants nursery. Over the next nine years, we added red osier dogwood, a crab apple tree, a red maple, river birch, butterfly weed, and common milkweed. We also overhauled all the front flower beds with a focus on native perennials like coneflower, black-eyed Susan, false sunflower, tickseed and butterfly weed. Chickadees, robins, goldfinches and nuthatches now forage in the front yard. Cedar Waxwings feast on ripe service berries. The front yard also attracts Eastern Phoebes and Black-throated Green and Yellow Warblers during migration. Chipping sparrows have nested in the pagoda dogwood tree since 2020.

Along the way, we installed a pollinator garden with many species of native flowers in the back yard, including false sunflowers, asters, goldenrods, bee balm, spotted bee balm, cup plant, compass plant, rattlesnake master, snakeroot, ironweed, and Joe Pye weed. We included little blue stem, prairie drop seed, and purple love grass. This fall we planted spikenard and foam flower. The increase

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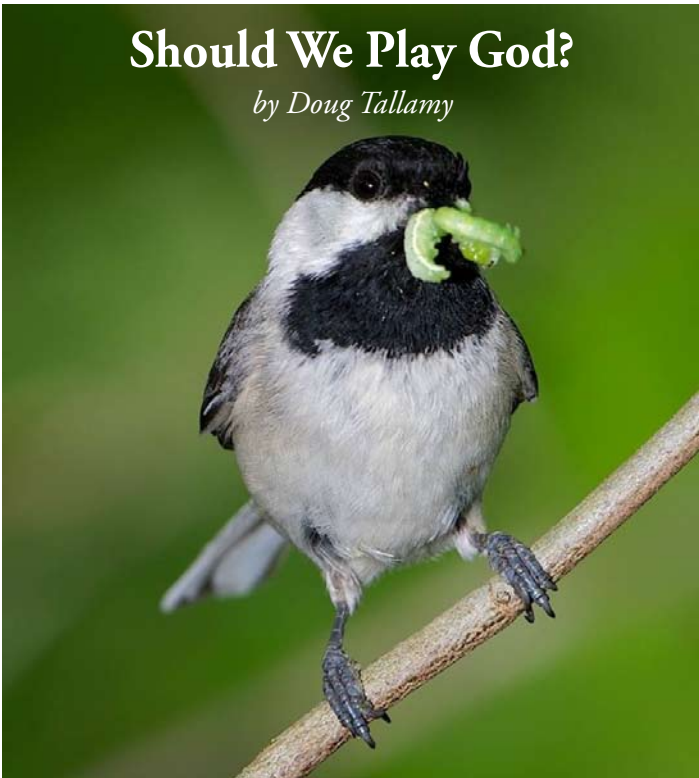
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Should We Play God?

by Doug Tallamy



The natural world we encounter today is not the same world we would have encountered 500 years ago, 100 years ago, or even 20 years ago.

When I was a boy (60 yrs ago), I could count on finding a box turtle, a spotted turtle, and several species of salamanders whenever I walked through a nearby woodlot. Scores of grasshoppers jumped up from the meadow I crossed before reaching that woodlot, and I never worried about picking up a deer tick because I didn't know what a deer tick was; I explored those fields and woods for years without ever encountering one. If I saw a white-tailed deer, it would have been a very special day, for they were rare in north central New Jersey where I grew up. I didn't know much about plants, but nearly all of the species I walked by in those days were native to North Jersey.

Today were I to ramble behind my old neighborhood, I would find no box turtles, and the woodland pond that was home to spotted turtles and the breeding ground for local salamanders was long ago filled in. I would meet several deer and the deer ticks they support. Most of the native understory plants would have given way

to autumn olives, barberries, Amur honeysuckles and a host of other alien plants.

As I speak to the public about why these ecological changes are a primary cause of the declines in native species, and how such declines threaten ecosystem function and thus the production of our life support systems, I am often asked why we don't just let nature take its course to bring back white-tailed deer. Is it wise for us to interfere with natural competition among plants and animals? And what of the philosophical question regarding our right as mere human beings to "play God" and decide what lives and what dies.

But we can't let nature take its course because she is no longer able to. We have removed the means by which nature once restored balance in disturbed ecosystems. In the case of invasive species, we have created unnatural competitive interactions by importing plants, insects, mollusks, reptiles, birds, mammals and diseases from other continents without any of their natural enemies. This gives invasive species a huge competitive advantage over our native species whose populations are tightly regulated by dozens or hundreds of natural enemies. Throughout most of the country we have eliminated the wolves, cougars and bears that once kept deer populations in check. In fact, unnaturally high deer populations further tip the balance against native vegetation because deer prefer native plants over Asian species.

As to whether we have the ethical right to decide whether a plant or animal lives or dies, some argue that we do not. But it would be hard to find someone who did not believe humans are more important than any other species. But I can assure you that lions, toads, houseflies, and earthworms are important in their own right. The reality is that many who question our inherent right to manage invasive species make decisions about what lives and dies every day. Every time we choose to plant a non-native species over a native plant, we are deciding whether or not the chickadee in our yard can find enough caterpillars to feed its babies.

If we remove invasive species, we are opening space for hundreds of native plants and thousands of species of the animals that depend on them. That is, we are providing opportunities for life. If we don't kill the invasives, we continue to starve our birds, shrink the distribution of native plants, and further compromise the ecosystems that support us. We have created conditions that demand we garden the world, which means we have to decide which plants live and which ones die. If we make those decisions wisely, more species will live. If we make them foolishly, more will die. 🌿

Peter VanDusen, Volunteer of the Year



Peter VanDusen and Kay Charter.

When our long-time habitat caretaker, Jim Charter, was no longer able to mow the lawns or tackle invasive plants species several years ago, good neighbor Peter VanDusen volunteered to help. He continued to help until this year when the work load demanded that we hire him. This year, we honored him for his volunteer work. We are fortunate to have so many people, like Peter and Kathie, to help us in our efforts.

Instead of a plaque, we gave Peter a Saving Birds cap that said : VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR 2021. 🌿

From the Executive Director's Desk

by Kay Charter

When we began to plan for this year's programs, we were uncertain about how many events to have or what they should look like because of the lingering threat of COVID: Should we limit the numbers of attendees and/or keep all events out of doors or hold no events at all. In the end, we held all events but one out of doors, and – as our fundraiser approached and the Delta variant was on the rise, we cancelled our popular indoor silent auction in order to prevent close contact. Still, everyone in attendance had a great time. As it drew to an end, one participant said that we should have more events like that one. Assuming we will be able to hold more public events next year without concern over the virus, we will certainly take that advice.

As you can see by the masthead, there have been a few changes since the publication of our spring newsletter. Our Board President, Bert Thomas, stepped down as did Secretary Carol Ross, and Anne Rodeck left to pursue her work with young children, and – after years good of service – our secretary Carol Ross also retired. Our neighbor Trish VanDusen has taken her place as Assistant Director.

Dave Barrons took over as president and he hit the deck running by requesting that Saving Birds take over the Sleeping Bear Birding Trail. Created by Saving Birds member Mick Seymour and launched in the spring of 2013, this trail was one of the earliest birding trails in the state. Dave was involved as fundraiser to garner funds to underwrite costs for rack cards, website and other issues. When Dave raised the question as to whether or not we should take over the trail, our board members voted unanimously to do so.

The board also strongly supported the restart of the birding festival that Dave and I produced as a Chamber of Commerce event from 2011 through 2015. Because birding brings billions of dollars into local economies across the country, he and I wanted to raise awareness among the local businesses and merchants that attracting birdwatchers to our county is good for business. We had said we would run the program for five years and then try to find someone else to take it over. As that did not happen, the festival simply went away.

When our current Board of Directors learned about that birding festival, they voted to restart it as a Saving Birds event. Registration will begin on Thursday afternoon, June 2, birding field trips will take place all day Thursday and Friday and there will be speakers on both nights. Saturday evening will see a buffet banquet and Michigan super birder Brian Allen's informative and entertaining presentation about one of his trips to Peru.

We also have a fantastic new website with information about how to help birds, our history and our impact over the past 20 years. It has the same domain name, so check it out at saving-birds.org.

Here's hoping that by the time the New Year arrives, we can finally say goodbye to a virus that kept most of us isolated indoors, and left such a terrible path of destruction in its wake.



Letter From Our Board President

by Dave Barrons

Never did I ever expect to be board president of any organization. But here I am president of Saving Birds Thru Habitat, and feeling that it was meant to be. Kay and I have worked together, in one fashion or another, for nearly twenty years. I have been on the board of Saving Birds for 5 years and, as president, I am looking forward to the challenges we are making. By the time you read this, our new website should be launched. We are making plans to resurrect the Leelanau BirdFest, a bird watching festival scheduled for next June, and we adopted the Sleeping Bear Birding Trail as one of our own projects. Both the festival and the Trail provide ways to reach out to that part of the birding community not yet attuned to our conservation message.

My personal connection to birds began when I was a child, standing at a window, when I was barely able to see over the sill. That large window looked over a back yard that backed up to a city park gone wild. My mother kept a list of the birds she saw through that window. I remember when a morning breakfast routine was interrupted by a loud, "Oh what is that bird?" when she had spied something new. Out came the Peterson Field Guide. Eventually, the list contained two columns of bird names and the dates of sighting, hand written in my mother's scrawl.

I remember the thrill we all experienced the first winter Evening Grosbeaks came in. I was small enough that the big black, yellow and white birds seemed like creatures from a different world. They were almost parrot-like. Another time, I recall my mother's excitement at seeing a Dickcissel, and my laughter at first hearing that name.

My wife, Patty, and I have retained my mother's tradition, by keeping a single list of birds seen through large windows overlooking yard, gardens and wild space. We've lived in Leelanau county for 33 years, and keep our list on the blank pages at the end of our Peterson's Field Guide, still a favorite. Our list now numbers 74 species, topping my mother's list a bit, likely due to our location on a bird-rich peninsula.

Dave Barrons

SBTH New Assistant Director: Trish VanDusen



Trish VanDusen grew up on Old Mission Peninsula and has called Leelanau county home since the early 70s. She currently lives on Bass Lake with her husband, Peter, and dog, Rose. They have enjoyed the beauty of the lake for 30 years, where the same loons and sandhill cranes return annually to nest and raise young.

Trish helped operate the Lighthouse Coffee Shop with her mother, Irmgard Griffin, for 15 years. She credits her

mother's good cooking and influence for her own love of cooking, and for what eventually turned into a catering career. Along with her interest in the food industry is a love of working with children, which led her to a position with the Montessori Children's House in Traverse City. There she worked for over 16 years and helped develop the "Della Terra" program—a hands-on "kitchen classroom" education for K-6th grade students, combining vegetable gardening with food nutrition and preparation.

When not working at the Discovery Center, Trish enjoys time outdoors hiking, xc-skiing, and sailing. She feels fortunate to live in such a beautiful area, experiencing the change of seasons and the bird migration of the region. She and her family also enjoy part of the winter in southern Veracruz, on the Gulf of Mexico. Together they have created quite an extensive birding list over the years!

Trish looks forward to learning more about songbirds, their habitat needs, and working with Saving Birds Thru Habitat! Trish has already proven to be a great asset to our organization; we feel very fortunate to have her on board. 🐦



Leelanau Birdfest, 2014 with Brian Allen.

Earlier this year, our Board of Directors voted unanimously to bring back the birding festival which our Director, Kay Charter and President, Dave Barrons, originally produced from 2011-2015 for the Leelanau County Chamber of Commerce. Our new festival, the Leelanau BirdFest, will run from June 2nd through the morning of June 5th of next year. Although we will repeat many of the field trips offered during the first festival, some may be different.

All trips will be to high quality birding areas and we will – as we did last time – have expert birders to lead the trips. We will also have speakers on various bird related issues on both Friday and Saturday evening, and we will host a Saturday night banquet for attendees. Keep track of progress with this stellar event on our NEW website: www.SavingBirds.org 🐦

Kathie Snedeker Honored as Volunteer of the Year



Kathie Snedeker and Kay Charter.

For the past ten years, our friend and long-time member Kathie Snedeker has generously spent time twice a year editing our newsletter. Although it is a time consuming and tedious task, she has not once complained. In fact, she has sworn that she loves doing it. The volunteer (or conservation) of the year committee felt it was past time she was recognized for her good work. This year, Kathie was one of two dedicated volunteers we honored.

At one time, we presented our awardees with commemorative plaques. Recently, we have tried to give them something that would not only serve as an award, but that would also be useful to them. Kathie is a dedicated photographer, so her award was a picture frame with the honorary text engraved across the bottom. 🐦

Not All Grassland Burns Are The Same

by Kay Charter



Charter Prairie burn several years ago.

For the past dozen or so years, the Leelanau Township Fire Department has conducted prairie burns on Charter Sanctuary as training sessions for grassland fires. Grassland ecosystems are essential to a number of declining bird species like meadowlarks and bobolinks. In order to eliminate thatch and keep unwanted woody species like autumn olive – or even native brambles – at bay, burning is essential. Such burns are conducted every 2 - 3 years.

In April of this year, I learned a new lesson when the Department conducted another controlled burn on the little bluestem section – the only one that will be managed. (Other areas will go through early forest succession.) When the Department arrived, Chief Hugh Cook said they were going to employ a different tactic. The fire has always been started along East Omena Road, at the bottom of a hill that rises to our Habitat Discovery Center, where the prairie grasses

give way to our lawn. Fires move faster going uphill, and even more quickly if the wind comes up to push it. But when Hugh arrived, they would begin at the same place, however they were going to conduct a slow burn. This burn took more than 45 minutes, while earlier burns had moved far less than half that time.

As the grass regreened, it was clear that the result was amazing. All of the woody plants that survived earlier burns were gone.

Hugh has mentioned in the past how beneficial it has been for the Department to learn from actual on the ground experiences. And this year, I learned the value of how a well-educated fire chief proved to be beneficial to the environmental integrity of my prairie.

My heartiest thanks to our well trained and dedicated fire department and its chief. 🌿



A Bit of One Woman's Journey From City Mouse to Country Mouse.

By Michelle Alfandari

I have been thinking a lot about mud, which eventually made me think of other things, including non-gardeners. As we emerge from the longest, strangest, discombobulating, navel gazing winter of lockdown, spring has arrived. Warm and sunny weather is melting the snow and ice creating a



slippery stew of mud and deep grooves on our dirt road destined to splatter whatever you are wearing or driving. Mud becomes a constant consideration for all we do from the least messy way to walk to our mailbox, or the less treacherous route to drive. One day, anxious to get to my second

Covid vaccine appointment, I drove faster than the 20 mph speed limit on our unmanageable road, and the mud took over. As I was about to veer off the road, I had just enough time to regain control while considering the irony of a head-on collision with a tree while en route to the life-saving jab.

But there is a great virtue to our muddy road in that it discourages other drivers who don't reside on it from using it as a

thoroughfare. Thus, we who live in this isolated, quiet, rural haven wouldn't have it any other way. We ultimately love our mud. While thinking about mud I recalled my first spring in this house. My neighbor Mike told me roots were exposed on a particular tree and I needed to add soil to cover them. He pointed to a pile of soil that had been removed during construction suggesting that would do the trick. A few days later armed with a shovel and wheelbarrow I headed to said pile. If you have never used a wheelbarrow, there is an art to it, especially on thawing and muddy grounds. There is also a logic to how much weight one can manage. This eluded me while trying to navigate the overloaded wheelbarrow down a slope - the wheelbarrow and I toppled over into a bath of mud. Definitely not a spa mud bath!

Michelle Alfandari is co-founder, along with Doug Tallamy, of the Homegrown National Park. Michelle was a high-powered Manhattan business woman who retired, along with her husband, in northwest Connecticut. When she attended one of Doug's presentations, she immediately wanted to help. Homegrown National Park was the result. She sent me this little vignette about her first experience with mud, which struck me as the perfect example of how she had happily transformed from a woman in high heeled shoes and business suits to one who "loved" her mud. 🌿

Our Twentieth Anniversary Celebration



Paul Baicich

On the blistering afternoon of Saturday, August 21, about 45 hearty souls braved the hot and humid air to join us at our Habitat Discovery Center to celebrate twenty years of work on behalf of our declining bird populations. Our friend and member, Paul Baicich, traveled from Maryland to present his wonderful program entitled "Our Birding Foremothers."

Few, if any of us would guess that it has been women who led us into – and through – the bird conservation movement of the late nineteenth into the middle of the twentieth century which began with Olivia Thorne Miller, Florence Merriam Bailey, Mabel Osgood Wright and Anna Botsford Comstock. Then came Rosalie Edge, founder of Hawk Mountain Sanctuary. Others followed, especially – as Paul explains – homemakers who influenced their husbands to support conservation issues such as wetland preservation and the "Duck Stamp" (actually a bird conservation stamp that supports our National Wildlife Refuge system).

We had asked Paul to limit his talk to 45 minutes. Although he went over by 10 or so minutes, people told us afterward that they could have listened to him much longer. Because of his popularity, we will be inviting him back for a repeat of this program. When we do, we will not limit his time on stage.


Because of COVID risks of gathering indoors, we cancelled our silent auction. But we offered door prizes and then live auctioned off a very nice bird feeder donated by McGough's. With Dave Barrons as our auctioneer, a good time was had by all as bidders were encouraged to go higher and higher. We will repeat a live auction for some items at next year's fund raiser. 🌿

Urban Lawn Conversion continued from front page

in insects has been incredible! We now attract so many bees, wasps, and butterflies that we struggle to identify them all. A third of our backyard is a vegetable garden, with a cedar fence to keep out deer, woodchucks and rabbits. We planted more butterfly weed and common milkweed along the fence.

We spaced three bird baths and five nest boxes around the yard. House Wrens have nested in one nest box for the last seven years. Three years ago, we had our first nesting Gray Catbird pair and this summer, Eastern Kingbirds hawked for insects from our utility wires and a Northern Flicker pair nested in a cavity in our paper birch tree. Baltimore Orioles hunt for worms in the silver maples.

We have enjoyed the process of converting our yard to habitat and then enjoying the birds and insects supported by the results.

Nick served as a board member in the early days of our organization. 



False Sunflower for pollinator garden.



Schroeck pollinator garden.

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The mission of Saving Birds Thru Habitat is to protect, enhance, and restore habitat for North American birds, and to educate people of all ages about this important mission and how to achieve it. Our goal is to improve habitat for migrating birds one backyard at a time.

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