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**WISHING EACH OF YOU PEACE LIKE A RIVER  
THIS HOLIDAY SEASON  
AND IN THE COMING YEAR**

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**AND IF THAT PEACE MUST BE DISTURBED,  
MAY THIS BE THE REASON**

by

Arlene Westhoven, GRNA Naturalist



## WOODY THE WOODPECKER VISITS GRASS RIVER NATURAL AREA ALONG WITH A FEW FRIENDS

Yes, we have “Woody”, a Pileated Woodpecker, Michigan's largest woodpecker. The pileated is the closest in appearance to the long-revered, favorite, always victorious, Woody. Now that I have your attention, let me tell you some facts about all the woodpecker species that make their lives as wood carvers possible:

1. Most perching birds have four toes, three in front and one in the back. Woodpeckers are *zygodactyl*, meaning that they are able to move their second toe to the back, two in the front, two in the back. This allows them to grasp a vertical trunk more firmly.
2. The center feathers of the tail are stiff and pointed. The tail is used as a prop to further support the bird.
3. Woodpeckers have sturdy, wedge-shaped bills activated by muscles that cross the top of the skull.
4. Their tongues are long and barbed, enabling the woodpeckers to reach into cavities to snag larvae or insects.
5. The skull is thick with a tight brain cavity that leaves the brain no room to “bounce” around during the pounding excavation.
6. Woodpeckers locate prey, such as wood borers, by sound.
7. Woodpeckers have an undulating flight because they close their wings after every flap.
8. Most woodpeckers have black and white stripes. This is a form of camouflage (disruptive coloration) which distorts the shape of the bird against the background to confuse predators.
9. Woodpeckers have bristles around their bill and a clear membrane over their eyes (nictitating membrane) that protect them from flying wood chips and dust.

### WHAT MAKES DIFFERENT WOODPECKER SPECIES UNIQUE?

**Pileated Woodpecker** – The Pileated is the largest of the woodpeckers we see in Michigan. It drills square holes and eats Carpenter Ants. Its bright red crest looks like a flame of feathers. This is “Woody”, although its call is nothing like the cartoon character.

**Downy Woodpecker** – This is the smallest of the commonly seen species. The male has red feathers at the nape of the neck, but the female lacks them. Both species are heavily black-and-white striped. Nest cavities are hidden by fungi or



moss.

**Hairy Woodpecker** – This species is larger (7“ - 9”) but very similar to the Downy.

Interestingly, the two species are not closely related. The bill of the Hairy is much sturdier.

Both the Hairy and the Downy are named for the feathers that cover their nostrils to protect them from wood chips.



**Northern Flicker (Yellow-shafted)** – Flickers feed on the ground drilling for ants. The flicker's dun-brown color is unique among woodpeckers. It's easily recognized in flight by the yellow under-wing feathers and white rump patch.



**Red-bellied Woodpecker** – If you're looking for a bright red belly, you will be disappointed. While there is a faint rosy patch at the base of the belly, more striking is the bright red back of the head and neck of the male, and the red neck of the female. The striped wings and dusky breast make for very attractive coloration.



**Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** – The shallow holes punched by sapsuckers are called sap wells because sap pools in them. The sap wells are drilled repeatedly in horizontal rows and lines. Birch and maple trees are preferred because the sap is sweet.

Hummingbirds also feed at the sap wells.



**Red-headed Woodpecker** – This member of the family is recognizable by its completely red head, black wings, and white back. It is a migratory bird, so we don't see it at our GRNA feeders in winter. Like many woodpeckers, it stores its food; but it is the only one to cover the niche with wood or bark. It will

even force insects it has hunted, such as grasshoppers, into its storage crevices. Red-headed woodpeckers are very territorial and will destroy nests and eggs of other hole nesters.

Woodpeckers are natural controls for many pests such as wood boring beetles or larvae and insects that destroy crops. In general, they feed on dead wood or enlarge holes in weakened wood. These birds are more beneficial than harmful.

All woodpeckers advertise their territory by "drumming" on resonant surfaces such as siding or poles. Woodpeckers may be identified by their calls and their drumming patterns. To hear the sounds made by woodpeckers, visit the [Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology: allaboutbirds.org](http://Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology: allaboutbirds.org)

Woodpeckers are active year round at GRNA. To hear and see woodpeckers in action, watch the birds up close at our feeders at the Grass River Center, open Thursday-Sunday 10am-4pm through December 20 or on the trails open dawn to dusk every day. Grass River Center hours will revert to Saturday and Sunday hours only after December 20.

Photos by John Benson, Alex Starr, Dominic Sherony, Chris Breeze, and James Dake;  
and courtesy of All About Birds

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## **December Holiday Traditions Related to Nature**

by

Emily Burke, GRNA Naturalist

Food, family, and gifts are common ingredients in almost all December holidays celebrated around the world. As I was looking at seasonal traditions that related to the natural world for our new [Facebook](#) quizzes, I discovered that every major December holiday celebration includes strong ties to the natural world. Betsy suggested that I share them with you.

Christmas: Bringing an evergreen tree into the home began in Roman times as a way for pagans to remind themselves of the coming spring. Decorating these trees with lights however, isn't believed to have become a tradition until the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Germany. Some say that people were inspired by the shape of balsam fir cones,

which point upright and resemble candles. Another explanation revolves around Martin Luther, the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformer, who is said to have become inspired to add candles to his Christmas tree when he returned home from a nighttime walk under a clear sky full of twinkling stars.

Hanukkah: In addition to its historical importance as the festival of the Maccabees, some sources believe that lighting an increasing number of candles on the menorah also originally marked the lengthening of daylight hours after the winter solstice. Additionally, the fact that the menorah is in the shape of a tree may symbolize aliveness and renewal, or the mythological idea of the Tree of Life found in various ancient cultures of the Middle East. At least one Israeli botanist has tentatively identified the plant the menorah is modeled after as *Salvia palistina*.

Kwanzaa: Not a religious holiday but rather a celebration of Pan-African culture, Kwanzaa means “first fruits” in Swahili, and it emphasizes the importance of the harvest, which is often symbolized with corn. Running from December 26<sup>th</sup> to January 1<sup>st</sup>, Kwanzaa’s festivities are derived from African harvest rituals and reaffirm the Pan-African philosophy that honors nature, among other tenets like family and community.

Yule: In this winter solstice festival, Wiccans and other pagan groups celebrate the return of the heat, light, and life-giving force of the sun. One of the world’s oldest December festivals, today the holiday is celebrated in many different forms by various sects, but usually includes lighting a fire or candles to welcome back the sun and its light.

Bodhi Day: This holiday is celebrated by Buddhists as the day that, around 500 BCE in northern India, Siddhartha Gautama attained awakening after fasting and meditating under a tree for 49 days, arising as the Buddha. The tree the Buddha sat under – a large, ancient fig tree – was transformed as well: it’s now referred to as the Bodhi tree and is a major symbol in Buddhism, representing the path to enlightenment.

Pancha Ganapati: This 5-day festival, originally conceived as a Hindu alternative to Christmas, honors the elephant-headed Ganesha, Lord of Culture and the Arts. Because Ganesha is often depicted as emerging from the forest, pine boughs or banana leaves are often used to decorate statues of him in home and public shrines.

The Islam religion is not celebrating any holidays in December this year; but their holidays are directly tied to nature, as the times of celebration are based on the lunar calendar.

You never know, some of this information may show up in our new quiz series on Facebook, so be sure to store this information in your brain. Check out our new [game on mistletoe](#) now, and look for a new quiz on Tuesday, December 22.

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## **YOUR HELP IS NEEDED TO FURTHER OUR EDUCATION MISSION**

*“How fortunate the Grass River Natural Area organization is to have someone with James’ significant, varied, and interesting education and experience as the Education Director. We look forward to participating in more educational experiences there. Thank you for all the important work you, your staff, and your volunteers do to protect the woodlands, wetlands, and all the critters who make their home there.”*

This quote is from a program participant and is particularly important to GRNA as it came after one of our recently COVID-adapted Owl Prowl programs. Education is and always was central to the mission of Grass River Natural Area, and we are proud of our education staff who did not miss a beat when asked to adapt our entire education program and safety protocols, beginning in March. At James's side are our naturalists Arlene, Franny, Anne, and Emily, who bring additional creative ways of looking at education to GRNA each and every day. Even now, they are introducing new online activities like the interactive quizzes on Facebook.

As demonstrated in this *In Otter News*, our naturalists are invaluable to making sure our education mission is realized every day. Please remember Grass River Natural Area and the work we do when you plan your year-end giving. Your gift, no matter the size, will help ensure our naturalists and James can continue their work developing new programming and adapting existing programs in 2021.

**[CLICK HERE TO MAKE A DONATION NOW](#)**

Thank you for your consideration.

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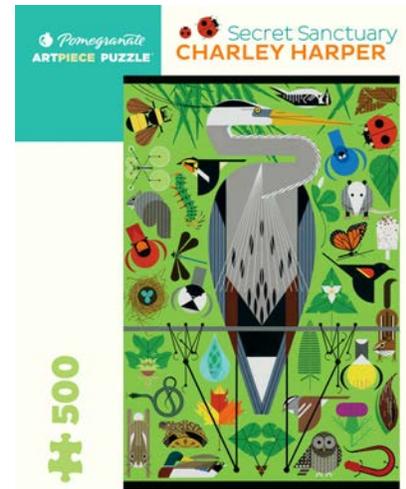
## GRASS RIVER NATURAL AREA HAS PERFECT HOLIDAY GIFTS online and in the Grass River Center Gift Shop

**SHOP ONLINE ANY TIME**

**OR**

**VISIT THE GRASS RIVER DURING OUR EXTENDED HOLIDAY HOURS**

Have you ever thought to look to GRNA for your holiday gifts? Well, you definitely should think of us this year. Our two new self-published books and logo wear are available online; and jigsaw puzzles, plush toys, games, more books, coasters, notecards, soaps, and much more are available at the Grass River Center. Sheila has done an amazing job of stocking the gift shop with appealing items for all ages and interests. To better accommodate your shopping needs, the Center is open Thursday through Sunday from 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. now through December 20.



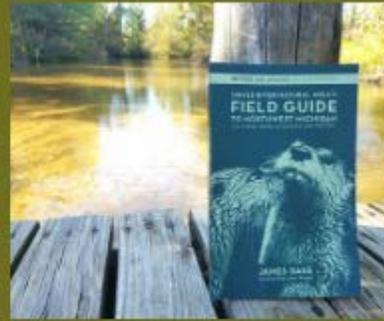
## NEW LOGO WEAR

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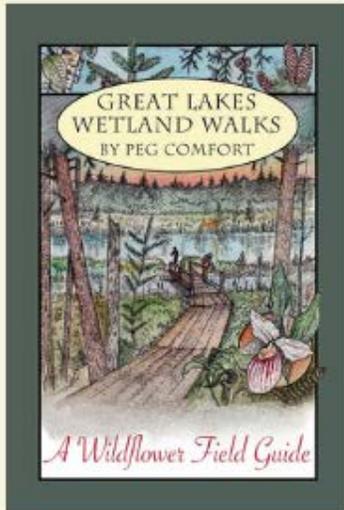
**The 2nd Edition of  
Grass River Natural Area's  
FIELD GUIDE  
to Northwest Michigan  
is now available.**



This guide is written and compiled by GRNA Education Director James Dake. It features several new and expanded sections and a new Foreword by Executive Director Jenn Wright.

Cost is \$18.87 plus tax

Order online by clicking on this box or available at the Grass River Center Gift Shop



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informative book  
is available online and in the  
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nature enthusiasts.**

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# YOURS TO EXPLORE ALL WINTER

January 9 & 10, 2021

## Grass River Shiver Snowshoe 5k/10k

Virtual Hybrid Format

Run or walk the course when you can on the  
9th or 10th and submit your time.

\$25 to participate

Receive a soup voucher from Short's  
& Grass River swag when you register.

Go to [grassriver.org](http://grassriver.org) to register.



Hike, snowshoe, cross country ski any time  
from dawn to dusk daily.

Grass River Center open 10 am - 4 pm  
Saturday and Sunday through the winter

See the GRNA Facebook page for more activities.

### CONSIDER A DONATION

Our financial well being is dependent on programming dollars and donations, and with the former sidelined for the most part at the moment, donations are of paramount importance. Your generous support is always greatly appreciated, but in these difficult

days, your willingness to help us continue our mission with a personal donation promotes you to Nature Warrior status at GRNA.

Grass River Natural Area is a nonprofit organization that has flourished for fifty-one years because of the generous support of people who value our mission "to manage the Grass River Natural Area, conserve and protect its watershed, and provide opportunities that increase knowledge, appreciation and community-wide stewardship of the natural environment".

If you believe in our mission and want to help us fulfill it for many years to come, please click on the Donate button below. Your support is greatly appreciated.

## DONATE



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