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SPRING RETURNS

It's good to know that some things do not change in our world that has been struggling to find a new normal for over a year now. The familiar sight of maple sap buckets on the trees at GRNA were a welcome reminder that the cycle of nature continues even while humans work to adapt.

ODDER NATURE

The first in a new series of articles

by

Arlene Westhoven, Naturalist at GRNA

"A Tale of Skunk Cabbage"

We anxiously await the first flowers of spring. We look forward to the purple Wood Violet blooms, the gold of Trout Lily and the pink Spring Beauties. But the earliest wildflower has none of these attributes and is smelly to boot.

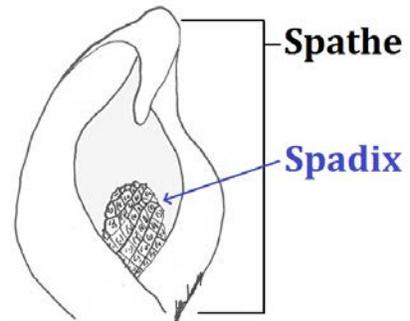


This plant is Skunk Cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*). The blooms hardly qualify as flowers as we know them. The flowers emerge on a club-like structure called a spadix. The spadix sits in a hoodie-like structure, the spathe, which is a mottled magenta and green. These structures emerge before the cabbage-like leaves which are a translucent

bright green.

Like most early spring wildflowers, Skunk Cabbage needs to get a head start to take advantage of light before the canopy emerges. It stores nutrients for next year's growth. The leaves soon 'dehisce' or melt, sending nutrients into a root structure called a rhizome for storage. In a sense, it's 'paying energy forward'. Once established, a skunk cabbage plant can live for 10 years.

Plants that photosynthesize, including Skunk Cabbage, store energy as starch. The stored starch is digested, releasing energy for plant functions such as growth, flowering, and production of leaves. How does Skunk Cabbage produce its own heat, even melting through snow? It has developed a more active digestive rate which allows it to produce more heat than is necessary for basic functions. The heat in the spathe can be 70 degrees higher than the surrounding environment. The temperature difference sets up a conducting system as cold air warms in the spathe.



Heat building up in the spathe activates the odor which attracts early emerging insects. Surprisingly, not only carrion beetles and flies are attracted, but also honeybees and even moths and butterflies. The heat acts as a warming oven which gives the insects a place to warm up and store heat for the flight back to home base. The blooms are an essential

source of pollen for early season insects. Pictured at left is the spadix, which is where the blooms are found.

The bright green leaves would be eaten by animals and humans, except for the odor. Also, calcium oxalate crystals in the vegetation cause irritation of the mouth and throat and are toxic when swallowed. The leaves are short-lived and soon disappear, leaving just the spadix, on which the seeds develop as a cluster of very dark purple berries.

Skunk Cabbage might appear to be from the "Little Shop of Horrors", but it is not carnivorous. So you are safe if you take a walk on the boardwalk section that passes over the dark mucky soil of the bog. Although we haven't seen it near the boardwalk, be on the lookout for this strange flower in wet, swampy environments. We have found it in an area along Cold Creek.

We hope you will see Skunk Cabbage melting its way through the snow. Let us know if you do. I think you'll agree that it's a plant with personality!!

Illustration courtesy of Google Images

PROGRAMS ON THE HORIZON

We continue to add programming as the response is encouraging and people participating are happy to follow the rules. Here is what is coming up in the next 30 days.



Spring Equinox Bird Walk

Saturday March 20, 2021 - 9:00 am to 11:00 am

\$5 per person, [must pre-register](#)

Who are the first birds to show up in the spring? Join us for the first walk in our birding series on the first day of spring as we look and listen for these early arrivals. Binoculars are available to borrow, or bring your own. If there is still snow bring snowshoes, or rent some

for an additional \$5 in the Grass River Center. Limited space. [Must pre-register.](#)



Maple Day!

Saturday March 20, 2021 - 11:00am to 3:00pm

Free, stop by any time

We will continue to boil sap to syrup at the Pavilion at the Grass River Center. Stop by any time to see the process of making maple syrup in action. Ask staff questions and hike on the trail to see where we collect the sap. The Center will be open indoors from 10am to 4pm. Pictured at left is syrup from this year's boil. The dark amber color is due to the high content of red maple sap.

Moonlight Owling

Friday March 26, 2021 - 7:00 pm to 8:30 pm

\$10 per person, limited space, [must pre-register](#)

Do you know which owl you're hearing when they "hoot" at night? Many owls have already begun nesting by this time of year. Learn about the calls and habits of local owls and then take



a hike under moonlight to listen for owls. Bring a light. Snowshoes are available for rent if snow is deep, or bring your own. Limited space. [Must pre-register.](#)

Spring Break

March 29 - April 2, 2021

While there will be no Spring Break Camp this year, the Grass River Center will be open from 10:00 am - 4:00 pm daily that week. Masks will be required inside the center.



Amphibians at Night

Friday April 16, 2021 - 8:00 pm to 9:30 pm

\$10 per person, limited space, [must pre-register](#)

Amphibians are beginning to wake for the spring! Learn the sounds and signs of our frogs and salamanders and then head out for a guided night hike to our vernal ponds to look and listen for calling frogs and stealthy salamanders. Bring a light. [Must pre-register.](#)



Spring Bird Walk

Saturday April 17, 2021—9:00 am to 11:00 am

\$5 per person, limited space, [must pre-register](#)

Join us for a spring bird walk to learn to ID birds by sight and sound and how to log observations online using the eBird webpage or app. Bring binoculars, or borrow some from the Grass River Center. Must pre-register.

NMC classes include an introduction to the 2nd edition of The Field Guide for Northwest Michigan by author James Dake and a course on amphibians. There is a cost for these programs. Additional information on these classes can be found at <https://www.grassriver.org/classes-and-programs.html>.

Watch Facebook and our [website](#) for additional in person programs as they are scheduled. New micro-classes appear regularly on [Facebook](#) as well.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Staff member Emily Burke, our Conservation and Education Specialist, is also taking over planning for volunteer opportunities at GRNA. If you have ever considered getting involved as a volunteer, now is the time. A few things are coming up that might be of interest and/or might help you feel more comfortable about taking the leap into volunteering.

- **May 1, 2021 from 9:00 am - 11:30 am** there will be Stream Monitoring Training. Spring Stream Monitoring will take place the following Saturday on May 8th, and the training on May 1st is strongly encouraged for new stream monitoring volunteers to become familiar with collection and sorting methods. Pre-registration is required for both the training and the monitoring event; email Emily at emily@grassriver.org.
- **May 22, 2021 from 9:00 am - noon** is Spring Stewardship Day when volunteers gather to help clean up the natural area trails, gardens, and the education center. No experience is necessary. Pre-registration is encouraged; email Brian at stewardship@grassriver.org.
- **May 22, 2021 from 10:00 am - 1:00 pm is a Volunteer Open House** to help would-be volunteers learn about different opportunities we have at GRNA. Come anytime during the 3 hour window. An experienced volunteer or staff member will be on hand at various stations throughout the natural area to provide information and answer questions.

Please join us for one or more of these opportunities if you think you might want to become a member of our friendly corps of volunteers. More information can be found at www.grassriver.org.

SUMMER DAY CAMP IS BACK!!!!

Yes, you read that correctly - James, the naturalists, and our interns are planning for five weeks of camps for 6 - 11 year old children. Each week consisting of four days of camp (M-TH) will have different activities, so campers can come for multiple weeks and participate in a wide array of programs. CDC guidelines will be followed. The cost is \$160 per week with a deposit of \$80 due at registration. Space is filling fast, so reserve your date(s) now. Weeks of camp are:

- Week 1 - June 21 - 24 is FULL
- Week 2 - July 5 - 8
- Week 3 - July 19 - 22

- Week 4 - August 2 - 5
- Week 5 - August 1 - 19 is FULL

[For more information click here or go to www.grassriver.org.](http://www.grassriver.org)



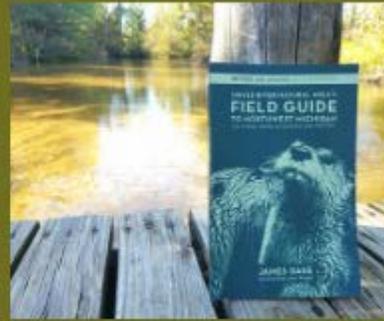
NEW LOGO WEAR

Purchase a shirt for yourself or as a gift and GRNA benefits



Choose from any of the logos featured above printed on a variety of styles, colors, & sizes from youth to adult. Order online by clicking on this box. A portion of the sale comes back to GRNA as a donation.

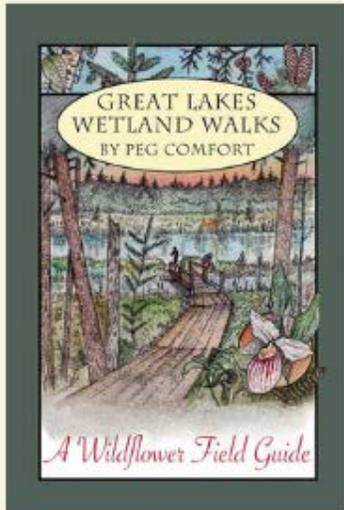
**The 2nd Edition of
Grass River Natural Area's
FIELD GUIDE
to Northwest Michigan
is now available.**



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
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nature enthusiasts.**

**Artistic illustrations and photographs
add to the book's appeal.**

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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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