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WHAT DOES "STAY-AT-HOME" MEAN FOR YOU AND GRNA?

GRNA is committed to providing opportunities for healthy outdoor recreation, solace seeking, restorative time in nature, and exploration for all ages during this challenging time. Additionally, we continue to ensure we are in compliance with and supporting the recommendations and orders being announced by the Governor and the CDC.

We recognize we can't close nature. Nature is good for your mental and physical health, and we encourage you to find time to get outdoors in your own backyard or neighborhood, or if that is not an option, our 7 miles of public trails remain open dawn-to-dusk daily. Before you head to the natural area, however, we ask you to take into consideration the travel and exposure you risk to yourself and others to get to GRNA. And, if you choose to use our trails, please maintain the six-foot physical distancing that is required to impede possible spread of the COVID-19 virus.

To further overcome boredom and sharpen your natural world education, our naturalist, Emily Burke, will continue to post *Fun in the Field* activities on Facebook and on our website, and we would love for you to share your photos as you enjoy those activities. Examples of activities are included in this newsletter.

Our staff and board of trustees are dedicated to taking a proactive approach to helping control the spread of this virus with any and all precautions needed to do so. Our staff continues to work from home, and our offices and the GR Center remain closed. We look forward to the time when we can once again connect with each of you in person. Until then, be safe.

BEWARE THE IDES OF MARCH
FOR RED-WINGED BLACKBIRDS,

MARCH BRINGS DRAMA IN THE CATTAILS

by Emily Burke



The return of male red-winged blackbirds from the southern United States is one of the Upper Midwest's first real signs of spring, an event that sets winter-drab marshes, pastures, and roadside ditches abuzz with noise and color.

The females won't return for another few weeks, and their arrival will be decidedly less flamboyant than that of the males; streaky brown and near-silent, the females will spend their first few weeks skulking through the reeds, quietly judging the males and their associated territories.

For the males, though, this is no time to blend in. Because the survival of red-winged blackbird offspring has just as much to do with the territory's resources as it does with the parents' genes, it's crucial for a male to obtain a high-quality territory with an abundant food supply of small *arthropods, water for drinking and bathing, and tall vegetation for safe nesting sites. The males stake claim to the patch of cattails they've selected with repeated displays: showing off their bright red epaulets (shoulders), flaring their glossy ebony tails, and uttering their distinctive "conk-a-REE" calls. For the first few weeks, these displays serve to ward off other males, and when the females arrive, the displays take on the additional purpose of attracting mates.

Males spend so much energy staking claim to and maintaining the highest-quality territory they can for good reason. A male who successfully defends a plum spot can attract up to 15 females to nest within his territory, and usually he will mate with all of them in a single season. But the females aren't quite as reserved as they may appear. Several genetic studies show that females frequently copulate with more than one males, and often lay clutches of mixed paternity. It appears that the males do keep track of these jaunts: females that have copulated with a male on an adjacent territory are more likely to be allowed to feed on his territory than adjacent females who have not mated with that male. However, they are also more likely than faithful females to be excluded from foraging on their social mate's territory. Complex, theatrical stuff, right!?



So the next time you pass a springtime marsh alive with the "conk-a-REE" of red-winged blackbirds, stop and contemplate all of the tiny dramas playing out in the cattails before you.

*Arthropod is an invertebrate animal of the large phylum *Arthropoda*, such as an insect, spider, or crustacean.

FUN IN THE FIELD ACTIVITIES

A few examples of activities from our Facebook page and website



Help birds build their nests! Just be sure to check out our guide above to know what's safe to put out in your yard for our feathered friends. Clumsy nestlings can get tangled in string-like materials, and dryer lint creates holes in the nest when it gets wet, but the birds will thank you for anything on the "helpful" list!

Bird Bingo

White-breasted Nuthatch 	Titmouse 	Crow 	Robin 
Cardinal 	Meadowlark 	Sand Hill Crane 	Chickadee 
Grackle 	Pileated Woodpecker 	Kingfisher 	Red-tailed Hawk 
Pigeon 	Mourning Dove 	Purple Finch 	Bufflehead 

It's a perfect opportunity to play some bird bingo ! Take along some bingo cards the next time you're outside, and each time you see a bird, mark it off on your card. First player to get a complete row, column, or diagonal wins! All birds included on these cards can be found in northern Michigan in late March, and all are relatively easy to ID - perfect for playing with both adults and kids. Now, who's ready to get their inner Bird Nerd on? Printable bingo cards can be found on the GRNA [website](#).

One last activity for you!

Visit our Facebook page or our website for more activities to do.



Wild Conifer Teas

Step 1: Venture outside and locate a pine, cedar, spruce, fir, or hemlock tree who looks healthy and whose needles you can easily reach. Easy-to-ID eastern white pine and northern white cedar are good bets for novices. See below for safety and identification tips.

Step 2: Gather a handful or two of needles from the tree. Be careful – some of them can be pokey!

Step 3: Boil a quart or so of water.

Step 4: Pour the water over the needles, cover, and let steep for 10-20 minutes.

Optional steps: Strain out the needles; sweeten with a bit of maple syrup or honey.

Experiment with different conifer species and concentrations or make your own conifer tea blend with several species!

Safety Tips:

- Be careful to only take as many needles as you need to make your tea.
- As with all foraging, never consume something unless you are 100% sure what it is! All native conifers are completely safe to consume in tea (and in fact boast more vitamin C than oranges), but yew, a nonnative, low-growing conifer that is sometimes planted as an ornamental in yard and gardens, is toxic.
- Some may be alarmed at the idea of consuming hemlock tea, but the eastern hemlock tree (*Tsuga canadensis*) is entirely unrelated to poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*), which superficially resembles Queen Anne's lace. Eastern hemlock tea is delicious!

[Click here for a full list of Fun in the Field activities](#)

Grass River Natural Area is a nonprofit organization that has flourished for fifty 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.

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