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CEDAR WAXWING

A cropped portion of the 2019 GRNA Photo Contest winning photo by
Mark Harder

THE MUSIC OF THE NIGHT

by Emily Burke

The nights are getting warmer, and with that comes the ability to finally sleep with the windows open. It's something I wait for all year, but not necessarily because sleeping in this manner is quiet and peaceful; spring nights are, on the contrary, full of the sound of the world waking up after a long winter, and some of my favorite voices joining the nightly chorus are those of the frogs.

As a naturalist, amphibian identification has never been my forte. For better or worse, I've always been more drawn to what are often considered to be the more "charismatic" classes of wildlife - like mammals and birds - as well as plants. But over the past few years, after my husband and I bought a house next to a pond and some wet woods with vernal pools, I've become fascinated with these amphibians, and I've gotten to know them through their nightly springtime concerts.



Here's how our property's "house band" struck up this spring: first, there were the wood frogs. Having spent all winter literally frozen solid, they thawed out as soon as air temperatures remained consistently above freezing and, incredibly, immediately began calling. Mostly, they sound more like quacking ducks than frogs.

A week or so after the wood frogs began their vocal courting rituals, the spring peepers joined in. These frogs are aptly named, continuously emitting high-pitched peeps every night for hours. If you're lucky enough to catch a glimpse of one of these frogs in the daytime, look for the "X" on their backs to easily identify them.



Recently, these two early frogs have been joined by a third section of the band, the western chorus frogs. The trills of these frogs are reminiscent of running



a finger along the edge of fine-toothed comb. And as spring leans toward summer, I'm looking forward to hearing the song layers added by leopard frogs, toads, and treefrogs, among others.

So, if you find yourself stuck at home on a night this spring wishing you could go hear some live music, know that all you have to do is pop the window open.

REMOTE PROGRAMS

We are continuing to monitor the Governor's Executive Orders as well as the latest health agency recommendations, and the safety of our visitors is our top priority. Rest assured that as soon as we have updates on the status of our summer programs, we will pass them along to you. Until then, we've put together the following virtual and remote programs for your enjoyment!

May Self-Guided Wildflower Walk



Many wildflowers start to bloom in May, so pick up our new May Wildflower Guide before you hit the trails. These are available at our trail kiosks, or you can download and print one yourself [here](#).

Storybook Trail

Come explore GRNA's new Storybook Trail. We've posted the pages of the award-winning children's book *Crickwing* by Janell Cannon on our Fern Trail boardwalk. Starting at trail post 12, head to trail post 13 to find out what happens to this artistic cockroach when he messes with the leaf cutter ants! We'll be changing up the story every few weeks so you can discover a new favorite book all summer long.



New Microclasses

Spend less than 20 minutes learning something new or refreshing your memory about the natural world. These are available on our Facebook and Youtube pages, and a new class



is posted every weekend. Click below to take the most recent classes.

[Deciduous Tree ID](#)

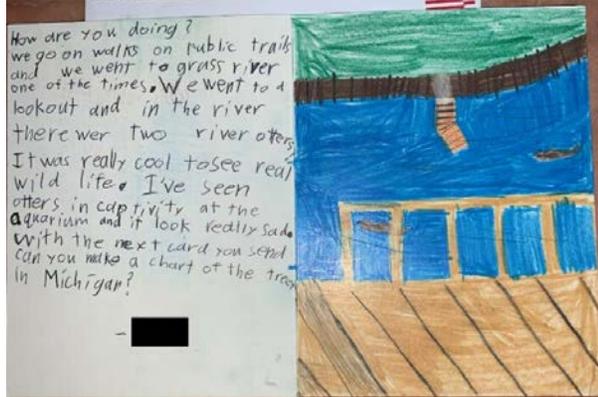
[Spring Edible Plants and Fungi](#)

Nature Pen Pals

Send James and Emily your nature

questions, thoughts, or drawings, and we'll respond with handwritten letters! Send your letters to:

James and Emily's Nature Pen Pals
c/o Grass River Natural Area
PO Box 231
Bellaire, MI 49615



New Fun in the Field Activities

These family-friendly activities are designed to encourage kids to get outside during school closures and are posted daily to our [Facebook page](#) and [website](#).

VIRTUAL BLOOMS & BIRDS

with your guide, Julie Hurd

Leatherleaf

Chamaedaphne calyculata

and Bog Rosemary

Andromeda glaucophylla

These two woody shrubs are both members of the Heath family and they frequently are found growing in proximity. They share several traits, including small pink/white flowers and simple alternate evergreen leaves with rolled edges. The presence of these two species helps to define a wetland habitat.



Leatherleaf blossoms are found on terminal branches. The individual five-lobed flowers resemble little lanterns dangling in a row. As indicated by the common name, the leaves are shiny green and leathery with brown undersides. Bog rosemary blossoms, in contrast, grow in clusters of 5-7 individual bell-shaped flowers. The leaves are narrower than leatherleaf, resembling those of culinary rosemary, although this plant has neither scent nor taste to appeal to cooks.

Look for bog rosemary and leatherleaf in the Sedge Meadow growing with sweet gale and

swamp roses. Compare the two shrubs and note the family resemblances.

Goldthread
Coptis trifolia

Goldthread is one of the smallest spring



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merals. Look for it in wetlands where its evergreen leaves can be seen amidst the drab winter background. Each three-part compound leaf grows on its own wiry brown stem. The white blossoms have 4-7 petal-like sepals surrounding the yellow center. The

plant's common name references its golden yellow roots.

Those fine hair-like golden roots are time-consuming to gather in any quantity but have various uses. Native Americans collected them to produce a yellow dye. An alternative common name, canker root, recognizes that a tea made from the roots soothes mouth sores as well as teething babies.

At Grass River, look for goldthread on “nursery stumps” – the remains of very large trees that, as they decay, provide a nutrient-rich environment for many small wildflowers. These microhabitats line the boardwalks through the swamps, where you will often Canada mayflower and creeping snowberry growing among the goldthread.

Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Pheucticus ludovicianus

Brilliantly colored in black, white, and rich strawberry red, male rose-breasted grosbeaks are a sight for winter-weary eyes at the feeder, where they can often be seen snacking on black oil sunflower seeds. Females and immatures are a drab streaky brown, but are distinctive nonetheless due to their massive bills.



Start looking for these birds this week, as they are just arriving from their wintering grounds in Mexico and Central and South America. If you don't have a feeder or haven't had luck attracting these striking birds in the past, the best way to find one is to follow their voice.

Listen for a song that is very reminiscent of the robin's *cheerily cheer up* tune but is somewhat looser and much sweeter in quality, like a robin in an especially jolly mood.

Thank you Julie for taking us on your delightful and informative tours!

In Otter News every other week to keep you informed, educated, and entertained. We will include the Microclasses, some of the Fun in the Field activities from Facebook, and a lead article from one of our naturalists in each edition. We hope this helps to fill your days.

CONSIDER A DONATION

Our financial wellbeing is dependent on programming dollars and donations, and with the former sidelined for the time being, 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 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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