

Seven Ponds Nature Center

2020 Annual Report



SEVEN PONDS NATURE CENTER

3854 Crawford Road

Dryden, Michigan 48428

810-796-3200

spnc@sevenponds.org

www.sevenponds.org

www.facebook.com/SevenPondsNatureCenter

Mission

The mission of Seven Ponds Nature Center is to conserve the natural environment of the nature center as a sanctuary for native plants and animals, as a living classroom for environmental education, and as a peaceful retreat for its visitors. The nature center's mission, further, is to foster an understanding and appreciation of our natural world, and to develop an environmental ethic in the people and communities of Southeast Michigan through education, service as a community resource, and responsible stewardship of nature center and adjacent lands.

2020 Board of Directors

Nancy Buck, Chairman, Member-at-large

Joanna Pease, Vice-Chairman, Grosse Pointe Audubon Representative

Paul Messing, Secretary, Macomb Audubon Representative

Greg Gossick, Treasurer, Oakland Audubon Representative

Daryl Bernard, Ex Officio, Executive Director

Kathy Churchill, Member-at-large

Sandy Cornell, Member-at-large

Ruthanne Flory, Member-at-large

Kelly Heyner, Member-at-large

Gisela Lendle King, Detroit Audubon Representative

Diane Matheis, Member-at-large

Mike Mercier, Lapeer Audubon Representative

Jocelyn Scofield, Member-at-large

Susie Stroh, Member-at-large

Terry Toland, Member-at-large

Nan Toppin, Member-at-large

Charlie Turner, Lifetime Member

Lisa Yarema, Member-at-large

2020 Staff

Daryl Bernard, Executive Director

Carrie Spencer, Director of Environmental Education/Chief Naturalist

Diane Rankin, Office Manager

Mike Grappin, Maintenance

Stacey Holinsworth, Weekend Receptionist/Gift Store Manager

Nicole Kopas, Naturalist

Katie McKiernan, Naturalist

Nancy Kautz, Seasonal Naturalist (retired, May 2020)

Karen Page, Seasonal Weekday Receptionist/Media Specialist (retired, May 2020)

SEVEN PONDS NATURE CENTER

2020: The Year in Review

INTRODUCTION

By almost any measure, 2020 was a difficult year for Seven Ponds Nature Center as the staff and board worked to overcome the challenges faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many programs, trips, tours, and events were cancelled, and the nature center faced a nearly two-month shutdown, including staff lay-offs.

Although this was an ominous way to start a new decade of operations, the nature center largely remained a place where people could turn for solace and retreat.

LAND STEWARDSHIP

For more than five decades the staff and volunteers of Seven Ponds have worked to nurture and care for the land and water around the nature center. As such, we are the proud stewards of nearly 500 acres of forests, fields, grasslands, ponds, and wetlands. The nature center serves as a living textbook of the natural communities found in Southeast Michigan. Working to preserve native species, remove invasive species, and maintain the trails, nesting boxes, prairies, and woodlands is an ongoing challenge and requires the efforts of the entire naturalist staff, maintenance crew, and numerous volunteers.

The year marked the ninth in a row of our “Forest of the Future” tree planting project. Funds were obtained through the nature center’s “Buy-a-Tree” campaign and various native trees were purchased for the planting. In 2020, 114 northern white cedar trees were planted in the cedar swamp area near the A-Frame Bridge. These cedars were planted in groups of five and enclosed in fencing to protect them from browsing deer. Major changes were made to the small berm behind the Butterfly Garden, as nearly 30 non-native white spruce trees were removed. In their place we planted a variety of shrub and trees whose berries will benefit birds and other wildlife in the years ahead. These trees and shrubs were purchased through the “Buy-a-Tree” campaign.





Seven Ponds continued its tradition of managing well over 100 nest boxes for songbirds and Wood Ducks. Our songbird boxes were utilized by Tree Swallows, Eastern Bluebirds, House Wrens, and Black-capped Chickadees. With a cadre of volunteers, each checking their own assigned section, the boxes were monitored weekly over several months, with results and data submitted to *NestWatch*, a national project coordinated by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. By participating in the NestWatch program, Seven

Ponds contributes to the scientific endeavor to better understand the status and trends in the reproductive biology of birds. In addition to songbird nest boxes, Seven Ponds maintains more than 40 larger nest boxes, which are utilized by a wide range of birds and other animals, including Wood Ducks, Eastern Screech-Owls, Gray Squirrels, and other critters.

The nearly seven miles of trails throughout the North-80, Paul's Woods, Earl's Prairie, and areas around the interpretive building provided access to a wide diversity of habitats for both members and non-members.



Our battle against non-native, invasive plants continued in 2020. Nature center staff and volunteers worked on at least fifteen species of invasive plants, including garlic mustard, glossy buckthorn, honeysuckle, crown vetch, oriental bittersweet, autumn olive, Canada thistle, dame's rocket, and purple loosestrife, in areas throughout the nature center's property, including near the building, in the North-80, in Earl's Prairie, around the lakes, at Richie Pond Preserve, and at Jonathan Woods. The effort against invasive plants was spearheaded by first-year Naturalist Nicole Kopas, who coordinated efforts with staff and volunteers. Special emphasis was placed on removing invasive plants around the observation tower and along the tree line in the North-80.

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

A key part of our mission is to act as a living classroom for environmental education. In 2020, this part of our mission suffered the greatest blow due to COVID-19. January and February saw our normal offering of programs for children, including school field trips, homeschool programs, scout programs, Knee-high Naturalists, and Traveling Naturalist programs, as well as outreach, seasonal walks, and other special programs for children and families. When COVID-19 struck in March, each of these programs came to a halt with cancellation after cancellation. With the closure of the nature center through much of April and May, Annie's Big Nature Lesson did not happen in 2020. After much discussion, we decided to cancel Camp Seven Ponds as well.

In the pre-COVID days of January and February, the popular Winter Series took place, with presentations on six successive Sunday afternoons. Topics during this year's series included *What's for Lunch* with staff from the Potter Park Zoo, *Astronomy 101* with Ron Kyle and Mark Sortzi of the Seven Ponds Astronomy Club, *Bee Keeping 101* with Mark Spencer of the Seven Ponds Bee Keeping Club, *Window Pain: Helping Birds Survive in a Human World* with Heidi Trudell from Just Save Birds, and *Mount Rainier National Park* with Gordon Lonie, formerly of Sterling Heights Nature Center.

Once the nature center was back open in June, our naturalist staff – led by Director of Environmental Education and Chief Naturalist Carrie Spencer – worked hard to develop programming that would provide high quality nature experiences for children, families, and adults while still maintaining a safe environment for participants and program leaders. When programs resumed in fall and into early winter, all were conducted outdoors with limited enrollment allowed. Fall environmental education offerings included Knee High Naturalists, Nature Study Series for Homeschoolers, and Traveling Naturalist.

The arrival of the fall normally means the start of almost-daily visits to the nature center by groups of school children, who participate in environmental education provided by our expert naturalist staff. With the start of the fall school year largely virtual, the nature center remained silent. When possible, our naturalists took the nature center to the schools, coordinating programs with area teachers to provide outdoor nature education in the school yards in our service area.

The four clubs that bear the Seven Ponds name – Astronomy Club, Beekeeping Club, Birding Club, and Photography Club – also suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic. With in-person meetings at the nature center not possible, each club scrambled to offer services in other ways, including email contact, web-based meetings, and small outdoor gatherings.

Multiple field tours have been offered annually by Seven Ponds staff for more than

twenty years. In 2020, three planned tours were all cancelled due to COVID-19. On the agenda were birding field tours to Florida and North Carolina, and a natural history field tour that would have explored the Copper Harbor area and Isle Royale National Park.

SPECIAL EVENTS

Our special events were also greatly affected by the pandemic. WinterFest took place in February, but the remainder of our annual events were cancelled, including EcoDays, Party at the Ponds, the Astronomy Club's Celestial Skies over Seven Ponds, and Enchanted Woodland. We were able to hold our Native Plant Sale, which took place completely outdoors in June.

WinterFest was held on the first Saturday in February in 2020. Naturalist Katie McKiernan led the event, and the day was enjoyed by many visitors. A lack of sufficient ice on Treetop Pond meant that none of the traditional activities normally held there could happen, but on the day of the event snow fell and participants enjoyed many snow-related activities, including snowball throwing and snowman-making. S'mores were the treat of the day near the flames of Katie's bonfire.



While we were unable to offer our Enchanted Woodland in the fall of 2020, we wanted to provide a fun family opportunity that still permitted people to gather in a safe environment. We hosted an Enchanted Movie Night at Seven Ponds, an event where pre-registered families could enjoy a fun movie in the front yard of the nature center, outdoors, under the stars, and well-spaced. The Imlay City Downtown Development Association loaned the nature center a large inflatable movie screen, projector, and speakers. A fun time was had by all in attendance, despite a turn in the weather which resulted in a chilly October evening.



SEASONAL ACTIVITIES & PROGRAMS

Winter activities and programs offered in 2020 included three Winter Bird Walks, Crafty Flakes, Sunset Winter Walk, Jonathan Woods Winter Wonderland, Snowshoe Walk, Rock Painting, Chasing Tracks, Walkin' on Water, Sensory Nature-Winter, Chestnut Trivia Night, and Painting at the Ponds.

All Spring and Summer activities and programs planned for 2020 were cancelled due to COVID-19.

Autumn activities and programs offered in 2020 all took place outdoors with limited



enrollment, and included thirteen Fall Bird Walks, Earl's Prairie Walk, Yoga at the Ponds, Family Field Netting, Michigan BioBlitz Weekend, Jonathan Woods Walk, Family Pond Dipping, Nature Journaling, Painting at the Ponds, Prairie Seed Collecting, Walk Around the Ponds, Nature Walk with Your Dog on the Polly Ann, Nature's Symphony, and Sunday Naturalist Walk.

MEDIA & COMMUNICATION

Volume 53 Number 1 of the nature center's newsletter *Heron Tracks* was published in the spring, continuing a tradition of sending our quarterly publication to all Seven Ponds members. The newsletter consisted of an informative natural history article written by a Seven Ponds naturalist, a seasonal program schedule, acknowledgement of grants, gifts, donations, memorials and honorariums, club news, fliers for upcoming events, field tour information, volunteer news and opportunities, and information about many other happenings at the nature center. The staff worked hard to meet writing and publication efforts in order to get *Heron Tracks* in the hands of our members at the start of each season.

Our website, www.sevenponds.org, continued to be a source of information, updates, and program offerings. Visitors to the site could conveniently register for upcoming classes, programs, and events. Members could renew their memberships online, and new memberships could be started as well. Many supporters utilized the web site for their annual giving.

Naturalist Katie McKiernan managed the nature center's social media presence, including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. These internet mediums were used for education, information, and as a means of highlighting the happenings at Seven Ponds.

We enjoy a great relationship with our local newspapers, especially the *Tri-City Times* and *The County Press*. We always appreciate the support and goodwill they provide in advertising our programs and highlighting the good things happening at the nature center.

BUILDINGS & GROUNDS

Nature Center Closure

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the nature center in several ways. Following Governor Whitmer's Executive Order, the nature center building was closed to the public on March 16. Following the "Stay Home, Stay Safe" order, on March 24 all staff were restricted to working from home, and on March 26 staff were placed on furlough. On April 20 the trails and grounds were closed due to the inability to monitor their use. Numerous instances of dogs, bikes, fishing, and litter led to this decision. With staff back in place, the building and trails were re-opened on June 13.



Work on the Berm

During the summer we made the decision to change the berm between the Butterfly Garden and the back parking lot in favor of native birds and other wildlife. Sometime in the early years of the nature center a row of white spruce trees was planted on this berm. These trees, which are not native to this part of Michigan, had grown past their prime. We opted to remove the trees and plant numerous native trees and shrubs in their place, including red-berried elder, spicebush, Michigan holly, American elder, flowering dogwood, and arrowwood viburnum. These native plants, which have all been encircled with fencing to protect them from browsing deer, will produce berries that are favored by birds and other wildlife and will provide shelter as well. As an added bonus, the Butterfly Garden will benefit by receiving more sunlight. We're excited to watch this area develop in the coming years.

FINANCES & FUNDRAISING

The nature center missed out on many anticipated revenue sources in 2020 due to cancellations caused by COVID-19. Fundraisers cancelled included the annual Seven Ponds Bird-a-Thon, Corks & Caps, and the Holiday Auction. As noted previously, three field tours were cancelled. With a reduction in visitors during much of the year, admission fees and gift store sales were lower than anticipated. Program fees from our regular calendar offerings were down, and fees from school field trips and Camp Seven Ponds were reduced to zero.

Despite all of these losses of revenue, several actions helped the nature center push through this financial crisis. With the layoff of staff for nearly two months, a significant amount of payroll expenses were saved. Two staff members retired during the closure, further easing the burden on the staff salary budget. After cancellation of the Corks & Caps fundraiser, a special request for support went out to over a thousand members and supporters, who came through for the nature center with just over \$15,000 in donations. Upon return, the staff made a concerted effort to reduce or eliminate spending wherever possible, and several projects were put on hold. Seven Ponds was awarded a \$50,000 Payroll Protection Program loan, which was fully forgiven due to funds being used completely for payroll expenses. Additionally, Seven Ponds was the recipient of a \$5,000 Michigan Small Business ReStart Program grant.

Our year-end Special Gifts Campaign took on even more significance than usual in 2020. The response by our wonderful members and supporters was truly heartwarming and humbling. By the time the campaign ended in mid-January, over \$62,000 had been raised, far exceeding the budgeted amount of \$35,000. These additional funds will help the nature center through the uncertain first half of 2021.



STAFF, BOARD, & VOLUNTEERS

Seven Ponds' small, dedicated staff worked hard in 2020 to meet the many challenges they faced and continued to serve the community by adjusting programming and operations as needed. Unfortunately, during much of the year volunteers were unable to provide the assistance they normally contribute.

The naturalist staff consists of Chief Naturalist and Director of Environmental Education Carrie Spencer, and full-time Naturalists Katie McKiernan and Nicole Kopas. Diane Rankin is the nature center's Office Manager, administering payroll and bookkeeping among other duties. Gift Store Manager Stacey Holinsworth also serves as the center's weekend receptionist, greeting visitors at the front desk and checking in participants for programs. Mike Grappin oversees the maintenance of the building and grounds. Daryl Bernard is the Executive Director.

During the COVID-19 closure, two nature center employees made the decision to retire. Seasonal Naturalist Nancy Kautz began her career with Seven Ponds in 2006. An excellent all-around naturalist with a love for all-things-nature, Nancy truly enjoyed sharing nature with others and helping people of all ages connect with the natural world. Karen Page joined the Seven Ponds team as a Seasonal Weekday Receptionist in 2014. Always a welcoming, friendly face at the nature center, Karen would enthusiastically greet guests and often share the story of Seven Ponds with first-time visitors. Nancy and Karen will both be missed at the nature center. We appreciate their many years of dedicated service and wish them both much happiness and exploration in their retirement years.

The Board of Directors welcomed back Kelly Heyner along with new members Ruthanne Flory and Diane Matheis, as the terms of Mike Butterfield, Bill Haney, and Lois Rheame all expired. The following officers were elected: Nancy Buck as Chair, Joanna Pease as Vice-chair, Paul Messing as Secretary, and Greg Gossick as Treasurer. The board met six times throughout the calendar year to discuss nature center business and policies, review finances, and consider future opportunities. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and measures in place to help prevent infection, most board meetings were held virtually using Google Meet or Zoom. Two committees – the Finance Committee and the Development Committee – met several times during the year (often virtually) to discuss pertinent issues and opportunities.

While the activity of most of our volunteers was stifled by COVID restrictions, two long-standing volunteer groups, the Friends of Herbs and the Butterfly Gardeners, were able to carry on their efforts to enhance the nature center grounds, maintaining the Herb Garden and Butterfly Garden, respectively. Working outdoors and well-distanced, these groups helped enhance our beautiful gardens.

CONCLUSION

Despite myriad challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, Seven Ponds staff, supported by the Board of Directors, worked hard to ensure that members and casual visitors had a safe place of respite and escape, particularly important during this difficult year. As we move into the coming year, many of these challenges remain. Our desire is to continue to be the place our community can depend on.



Seven Ponds Nature Center Investment Funds

Endowment Fund

Market Value on 01/01/2020	\$2,633,397.81
Market Value on 12/31/2020	\$2,712,411.21
Income to General Account in 2020	\$120,229.40

Reserve Fund

Market Value on 01/01/2020	\$356,636.03
Market Value on 12/31/2020	\$370,268.83
Income to General Account in 2020	\$16,265.96

Seven Ponds Nature Center Activity Report

2020 - Seven Ponds Nature Center Activity Report

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	TOTAL	2019	2018
School and Youth Groups															
Seasonal	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	24	0	0	24	559	621
Explorer	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2417	3173
Traveling Naturalist	199	341	96	0	0	0	48	0	153	493	139	68	1537	2793	3113
Scouts	0	0	18	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	20	0	48	336	367
Homeschool	26	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	32	22	23	2	119	186	84
Birthday Parties	20	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	20	139	187
Annie's Big Nature Lesson	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1032	936
SUBTOTAL	245	355	114	0	0	0	48	0	185	549	182	70	1748	7462	8481
Misc. Adult/Fam Programs															
Nature Center	0	16	0	0	0	0	12	5	0	0	0	0	33	267	200
Outreach	14	9	3	0	0	3	14	8	4	2	0	0	57	3399	2525
SUBTOTAL	14	25	3	0	0	3	26	13	4	2	0	0	90	3666	2725
Member & Public Activities															
Camp Seven Ponds	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	176	143
Knee-High Naturalists	3	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	12	14	7	5	51	139	156
Pgms/Videos/Etc.	87	48	13	0	0	0	31	19	97	67	39	25	426	934	605
Special Events	0	170	0	0	0	36	0	0	0	22	0	0	228	1291	1318
Field Trips	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	32	22
Field Tours	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	54	45
Rentals	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	62
SUBTOTAL	90	228	13	0	0	36	31	19	109	103	46	30	705	2626	2351
Volunteer & Interest Groups	239	227	36	0	0	53	76	80	73	31	13	32	860	2451	2466
Casual Visitors	166	289	288	0	0	558	598	972	979	877	642	198	5567	5977	5868
TOTAL	754	1124	454	0	0	650	779	1084	1350	1562	883	330	8970	22182	21891