

Exploring Corvidae @ Environmental Interpretive Center

Oakland Owlet's families and friends enjoyed a special program at the Environmental Interpretive Center (EIC) on the University of Michigan's Dearborn campus Saturday, January 17th. Dorothy McLeer, Interpretive Naturalist and Professor at the University greeted our group. It was a cold and snowy day. Once everyone arrived, we gathered in a quiet room looking out at Center's bird feeding station. It was a wonderful place to view birds outside the windows. Within a brief time, substantial checklist of birds was created. The most obvious birds were the Wild Turkeys.



While the Wild Turkeys grabbed everyone's attention, Dark-eyed Juncos foraged on the ground nearby. Birds were streaming in and out of the feeders. Everyone was surprised to see several Red-winged Blackbirds in Michigan in January. These laggards forgot to migrate. Bright red male Northern Cardinals added color to the monochromatic landscape.



Good views of American Goldfinch showed some hints of yellow. Both the males and the females were sporting camouflage winter plumage. A total of fifteen species were recorded at the feeding stations. The tom male Wild Turkeys strutting under the feeders their beards swagging back and forth made this experience memorable.



The group looked at the exhibits in the EIC. Located in the Rouge River Watershed, several exhibits highlight the importance of the watershed. The Center is also the location of the Rouge River Bird Observatory. The RRBO was established in 1992 to study the use of fragmented natural areas by birds in an urban setting. The Center has an extensive display of hand carved birds representing the avian species in the area. Dorothy provided details about the creators of the carvings and mentioned that the interpretive displays will be updated in the near future. This project is being undertaken by the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit.



The group then moved into one of the classrooms to learn about the Corvidae family members in Michigan. Dorothy transitioned to Dr. Star Kraven-Madd, a character she created to discuss the traits, and unique adaptations of the Crows, Ravens, and Jays. The presentation was funny and factual, an unquestionably unique way to understand these fascinating birds that serve many ecological roles and adapt to an ever-changing environment. Everyone learned how to distinguish Crows from Ravens along with how these birds are associated with predators like coyotes and wolves.



Being indoors long enough for the temperatures to climb to double digits, the group then moved to the outdoor classroom. The morning snowfall had stopped. We wandered onto the trails in the natural area adjacent to the EIC. This 120 acre natural area serves as living laboratory for environmental study. The main branch of the Rouge River is its western boundary. Unfortunately, the River was almost completely frozen. As we entered the forested habitat, we saw and heard two woodpeckers. Both were seen at the feeding station, the Downy and Red-bellied Woodpecker. We also saw evidence of Wild Turkeys leaving their footprints in the snow. Dorothy guided the group along the trail to the Rouge River, pointing out some history of the property. In addition to the birds at the feeding station, we saw a soaring Red-tailed Hawk and a Carolina Wren. There were many other tracks and animal signs along the trails. Dorothy stopped along the way back to share stoies.



Everyone thanked Dorothy for sharing her expertise with the group. Dorothy invited everyone back to the EIC for their Maple Sugaring Program. The checklists for the program included 17 species of birds. Complete checklist for this hike is available upon request. It was a nice to be outdoor and appreciate nature and birds.



Photo credits: Kathleen Dougherty

