Turn Over A New Leaf—And Some Old Ones, Too!
Saturday, October 15
10:00-12:00
Before you rake up them in your yard, go out on a limb and learn about leaves! Branch out and discover the variety of shapes and “styles.” Compound your interest by differentiating between compound and simple leaves. Join a “colorful” discussion about why leaves take their “masks” off just as some people put their Halloween masks on! Learn to recognize the trees in your own neighborhood that also live in the Environmental Study Area.

Oh, Deer!
Saturday, November 19
10:00-12:00
What are the impacts on the plant life in the Environmental Study Area of our state mammal, Whitetail Deer? What do we know and how do we know? Become a wildlife investigator as we look for deer signs and clues about what their presence means for the future health of our forest.

Whoooooos Out There?
Friday, December 2
7:30-9:30 PM
What owl species are out in the Environmental Study Area? Give a hoot and join the search party as we call into the night to them and wait for their territorial response. It’s up to the owls whether they, too, give a hoot. No guarantees if they will—but it’s always fun to try… Dress warmly for this mostly outdoor evening program.

Young Naturalist Program to Start Soon!
Children ages 9-12 are invited to join the Center naturalists in another exciting series of monthly explorations of nature. Our “outdoor classroom” will be 300+ acres of natural habitat situated along the Rouge River.
Program sessions will take place from October-June. All but the November session will take place from 9:30AM-Noon on a Saturday. The November program will be held on a Friday evening. The program fee is $70. Each participant will receive a nature pack which includes various field guides, a bug box, and a nature journal. Participants are expected to share a common interest in exploring nature within a mutually supportive setting. Attendance at all program sessions is requested.
To register your child for the program, go to http://www.umd.umich.edu/eicprogramregister
The registration deadline is October 8. This is a popular program so please register soon! For more information, contact Rick Simek, the program coordinator, at (313) 583-6371.

Session Dates and Topics:

October 22: Pond Study
December 3: Trees of the Forest
February 18: Maple Tree Tapping
April 28: Spring Wildflowers
June 9: Frogs and Turtles
November 4: Owl Prowl
January 14: Animal Tracking
March 10: Making Maple Syrup
May 12: Birds and Migration
Now that summer days are past and fall is in our future, we shift our thoughts to increasingly cooler temperatures and all that those temperatures bring. But we can hold onto a memory of summer and all our walks in the woods, as well as hot weather yard work and yard work yet to come because living in Michigan’s wooded lands, disturbed areas, and some residential yards is a plant for all seasons; a gift that keeps on giving regardless of the temperature: Poison Ivy.

Poison ivy (Toxicodendron radicans) is found throughout the southeastern United States (Virginia to Florida and west to the Mississippi River) where it grows in all types of communities, ranging from open areas to forests, as well as in disturbed sites such as ditches and roadsides. It can grow as a plant from the ground, but is also an accomplished climber as a vine. When climbing it can be recognized by its adventitious, hair-like roots that cling to tree trunks or whatever substrate is supporting its skyward journey. It is one of the few vines that actually branches out and appears to be part of the tree, so beware of leaves that differ in appearance from the tree’s leaves. An easy reminder is “Leaves of three, leave them be.” Why should we leave them be? Wait and see…

To be botanically correct, it should actually be “leaflets three,” since poison ivy has compound, alternate leaves. The leaflet shape ranges from ovate to elliptic, with margins that are entire (smooth), shallowly lobed or serrated; usually all three margin types are found on one plant. Interpreters sometimes demonstrate the shape with overlapping hands, thumbs extended like the “thumbs” that some leaflets exhibit. Their tips are pointy, and the bases are rounded. Leaflet size is variable, ranging from 5 -20 cm (2 to 8 in) long and 2-12 cm (1-5 in) wide.

The plants produce small, greenish-white to cream colored flowers in April and May. The fruits mature in August and September, and are consumed by many kinds of birds and can be an important native food resource for migrating birds late in the fall season and during the winter when other sources of food are scarce. The seeds are frequently dispersed in bird droppings.

So far, so good: it’s a native Michigan plant, it provides food and shelter for wildlife, it’s a prolific groundcover as well as a lush vine—what’s the problem? Well, it causes major problems for 60-80% of humans who make physical contact with the oil produced by the plant. Poison ivy belongs to the cashew family (Anacardiaceae), which comprises about 70 genera and 850 species of trees and shrubs. Notable plants in this family include cashew (in the type genus Anacardium), mango, poison ivy, sumac, smoke tree, and marula.

All of these plants contain urushiols, the oily chemicals that make a brush with poison ivy at any time of the year such a painfully itchy experience. The oil, urushiol, causes painful rashes and blistering of the skin. Ever wonder why you can buy most other nuts still in their shells, but not cashews? The cashew’s store of urushiols is concentrated in an oily liquid trapped between the two layers of the shell. (It's no wonder that an old name for the cashew was "blister nut.") Contact dermatitis is an inflammation of the skin caused by direct contact with an irritating or allergy-causing substance. Reactions may be enhanced in the same person over time with repeated exposure. In contrast to building up immunities, the more contact one has with these plants, the greater the susceptibility to a rash.

Despite the benefits of poison ivy to wildlife, based on its “other attributes” you may not want it near your home and family. Getting rid of poison ivy in unwanted places requires caution and attention to detail. Chemical combat is not an effective route with this plant, so forget about spraying. The curled up leaves and stems are still covered in urushiol and able to cause a rash.

Whatever you do, DON’T BURN poison ivy, as the smoke will cause respiratory distress and swelling, sometimes fatal, in the throat, bronchial tubes, and lungs! “Pulling is the way to go,” says the Gardens Alive website (www.gardensalive.com). This meticulous step-by-step method for physically pulling poison ivy and bagging it not only keeps you safe, but also keeps harmful (and ineffective, in this case) pesticides away from family and pets as well as toads, frogs, and other creatures in a healthy environment—like yours!

-Dorothy McLeer
Sustainability in Practice—Solar Bird Bath and Homes for Bees

The EIC Sustainability Internship is a new initiative of the Environmental Interpretive Center (EIC) that is designed to provide a UM-Dearborn student with an experiential learning opportunity focused around sustainability initiatives and how they connect to ecological realities of the natural world.

The summer intern is expected to participate in and manage the Center’s sustainability initiatives, including its Community Organic Garden, mushroom garden, rain gardens, and composting project. The summer intern will also be responsible for researching and building their own sustainability project at the Center.

During the Spring I took a field biology course where I learned a lot about birds in the natural area. The field course was very interesting because I had never studied birds before. One day while I was walking around the EIC I noticed that there were bird feeders, but another popular structure used to attract birds, a bird bath, was missing. That is when my project came together.

To focus on the topic of sustainability the birdbath needed to utilize improvised components. While thinking about the general makeup of a birdbath I decided that a ceramic pot saucer could serve as the bowl and an old wooden post could be the stand. Before installing the birdbath, however, I researched the best position for the bath that would attract birds. I arrived at a solution to put a 16 inch saucer 2-3 feet off the ground in an area that is relatively open, but still close enough to shrubbery and trees that birds could fly to and from. Another suggestion I came across was that birds are more attracted to moving water than stagnant water, which led to my next idea…

A fountain. The birdbath was not going to be too large, but I was able to find a few fountain spray pumps that could be used for smaller areas. Luckily, there were solar powered spray pumps that allowed me to add this feature to the birdbath while still focusing on sustainability. A solar powered pump would be able to move water without wasting electricity, and is a great way to ornament a bird bath made to be sustainable.

Using more ceramic pottery, a second tier was added and some patio blocks were placed around the base for aesthetics. These were not necessary, but they helped make the birdbath more appealing. Although there are concerns about protecting the ceramic from winter damage, I hope that the birdbath is heavily utilized by birds during all seasons and becomes a regular attraction for visitors to the EIC.

- Wayne Roper, EIC Summer Intern

As someone interested in ecology, the issue with the declining honeybee population is something that catches my curiosity. Honeybees are extremely valuable to us because they pollinate a large portion of our agricultural crops while simultaneously producing honey. While they provide a great service to us and to the ecosystem, honeybees are not native to North America. We are essentially using a non-native species to occupy a niche in the ecosystem while the native bees are being overlooked.

As part of my EIC Sustainability Internship, I chose to build two bee nest boxes for some of Michigan’s native bees. Native bees, such as the solitary mason bees and leaf-cutter bees, are just as (if not more) important as honeybees when it comes to the pollination of our native wildflowers. Also, with potentially declining numbers of honeybees, native bees might be needed to fill the agricultural pollination niche that seems to be opening back up to them. We depend on bees for our own subsistence. This is one reason why providing habitat for them is crucial.

With these native bee nest boxes at the Center, not only will bees use them, but people as well. They are a new asset for the Center in terms of school programming. For example, we have a Pollination Partnerships program offered to school groups and organizations that will make instructional use of the bee boxes once the bees start to inhabit them.

The bee nest boxes are made completely out of salvaged wood. Two logs were used from our forest (with permission) to create the body of the house with a roof made out of scrap wood from a palette board. Holes were then drilled into the logs to create cavities that the bees will nest in. The holes are lined with 100% compostable tubes that will need to be replaced every year. The two bee boxes are situated in the rain gardens at the Environmental Interpretive Center.

- Dana Wloch, EIC Summer Intern