

Get ready for spring dave decalesta – 12/07



Most people are pretty much unaware of how much wildlife there is around Keuka Lake, right on the lake, the hills surrounding the lake, and in the countless streams draining into the lake. As the snowflakes are falling this winter consider some steps to increase your knowledge, appreciation, and interaction with wildlife next spring-summer-fall.

Increase your awareness. – There are numerous excellent field guides for birds, mammals, and reptiles and amphibians in local bookstores. All have identification guides, pictures, and descriptions of habitat, including nesting (for birds). Pick one up to read over winter, get a few as Holiday presents to give to friends and family. That way, come spring, you'll know what to look for, and where.

Start a journal/log. - An old trick to jog our memories, and keep track of significant sightings, obtain a diary/journal type notebook with blank pages and begin to use it to note observations of wildlife, and associated dates and weather conditions. Now I can go back and remember when and where I saw that Bald Eagle in March of '06, and the old squaw (rare duck) in April of '05.

Learn to identify birds by their songs. - Male songbirds sing in the spring to establish breeding territories and attract mates. Each species has a distinctive and usually beautiful song. There are bird tapes available for self learning. The Cornell Ornithology Lab in Ithaca (www.birds.cornell.edu) sells these tapes and provides guided tours of its woodlot (Sapsucker Woods) for beginners. Tapes are also available through the Audubon Society. Get a tape, gift one to a friend or family member, and be prepared for a whole new world out there. There are similar tapes for breeding croaks/peeps/trills for frogs and toads.

Get equipped. - Nothing brings that little tweetybird closer for a positive I.D. than a good pair of binoculars. Digital zoom cameras are cheaper all the time, and it's good to record visually the critters you see with the written description of what, where, and when.

Plan wildlife jaunts. - Organize hikes that combine treks to spots with vistas/overlooks with different wildlife habitats and different critters. The outlet trail from Penn Yan to Dresden is a great day hike: in May there is a profusion of wildflowers (trillium, wild geranium, Indian cucumberroot, starflower) and critters: in the early morning hours in spring the gorge is filled with birdsong, and later in the day there are dozens of turtles sunning themselves on logs in the bogs along the trail. Digging around in the sphagnum moss and leaf litter and turning over flat stones and logs in land surrounding any of the gorges feeding creeks into Keuka Lake will turn up interesting salamanders.

Call in the big boys. – More and more, people are spotting bobcats, coyotes and bears in the hills surrounding Keuka Lake. Got to any local sporting goods store and get a rabbit squealer/predator call. Get the tape that goes with it, and practice a bit. Come spring, you'll be able to go out on the ridgetops at dusk/dawn and call up a fox-coyote-bobcat-bear. Surprisingly, deer will also come running to these calls. Bring along the camera.

Rebuild/clean birdhouses and feeders. - Those martin birdhouses that never get martins? Take them down and clean out the years of accumulated nesting materials. Refurbish the bird feeders and bird houses. Invest in a couple of books that describe the best kind of bird feeder/bird house for the different birds and get a couple for the Holiday season as gifts.

Diversify your environment. - Most lake front properties are wildlife-free zones. No habitat. To increase your lakefront critters, replace the grass with cattails and sedges at the water's edge. Instead of covering up aquatic weeds off the end of the dock with black plastic, leave a few patches of weeds for the bluegills, perch, bass, and bullheads. Outback, if you have a woodlot, don't cut down snags or clear up all the wood on the ground, it's valuable wildlife habitat. If you have a big lawn, consider converting it back to forest. Install a rain garden to collect rainwater, rather than shunt it directly into the lake with drains. Temporary wetted areas in rain gardens do not promote mosquitoes, they don't stay wet long, they just act as sponges to temporarily store water.