

Thumb Land Conservancy NEWS

March 12, 2021

This newsletter is mostly for the birds.

Bebezland Farm

Flynn Township, Sanilac County

With the polar vortex, computer failure, and usual chores, it was a rough February here at the Thumb Land Conservancy office, otherwise known as "*Bebezland Farm*". We are located in the desolate wind-swept tiled barrens between Brown City and Marlette in southwest Sanilac County. In a 1-mile radius around us, there are only about 60 acres of forest - just 3% of the landscape. It is basically the same for about 10 miles around. I know of only a few woodlots in this area with any hardwoods, most consisting of very disturbed woodland too wet to farm and dominated by Silver Maple. Regardless, more woodlots are cut, stumped, and tiled every year to grow corn and soybeans.

If all goes well, one day our 73 acres will be a Thumb Land Conservancy sanctuary. Our hay field and pasture supports a fairly rich spring and summer bird community with American Woodcock, Bobolinks, Eastern Kingbirds, Eastern Meadowlarks, American Goldfinches, Field Sparrows, Song Sparrows, Red-winged Blackbirds, Brown-headed Cowbirds of course, Killdeer, Tree Swallows, Barn Swallows, a few Wild Turkey, and transients like Upland Sandpipers and Sandhill Cranes. We normally delay our first hay cutting until the end of July or first of August, which most farmers consider absurd, but allows young grassland birds to fledge. After 16 years, we have quite a large population of Bobolinks returning to our fields every May.



A male Bobolink in the hay field at Bebezland Farm.

The winter bird population here is generally dismal with a mob of House Sparrows and sometimes a gang of European Starlings that hold conversation over morning coffee. A small flock of American Goldfinches is one of the bright spots. Occasional American Crows and Screech Owls are heard off in the distance. Flocks of Snow Buntings appear in late winter but are soon gone. There are the passers-through like Turkey Vultures, Red-tailed Hawks, and sometimes a Northern Harrier. A Bald Eagle even stopped in last year which I promptly chased off for the sake of our all-white Pekin Duck and the cats. If someone told me I'd ever chase an eagle away from here I would have a hard time believing it. What a privilege to now have Bald Eagles as pests.

This winter has been a little better for our birds. It kind of started with my new hummingbird feeder a few summers ago and our continuing wildlife habitat improvements. For years, we let most of the yard revert to field, with goldenrod and other asters gradually expanding, and now Gray Dogwood out front. This summer, the bees loved our new patch of sunflowers, which also provided the Goldfinches extra autumn food. A small concrete bird bath that someone tossed was added. I planted a few Eastern Red-cedar or juniper trees rescued from

development sites. The Goldfinches began feasting this fall on nyjer seed in an expensive feeder that someone discarded apparently because the wireless “WingSong” microphone that transmits bird sounds into your house doesn't work. This feeder retailed for about \$180. We expanded the birds' winter feed with safflower seed, a little suet, a little peanut butter, and now peanuts. They get a small pan of water almost every morning. The return on this small investment has been the daily pleasure of watching a host of American Goldfinches and Dark-eyed Juncos along with several Mourning Doves, two Blue Jays, first one then two Northern Cardinals, two Downy Woodpeckers, and now two Tufted Titmouse, which is very good for around here. The bad part is that House Sparrows continue to mob the feeding area, but I hope to make progress on discouraging them.



The new flower garden with sunflowers at the TLC office.

Problems with buying seed to feed wild birds are that it probably displaces native plant communities and wild birds somewhere else, takes up space for growing people food, and creates an incentive to clear more farm land. A person can compensate by consuming less meat and alcohol, to start with. For now, a few bags of seed seem little to ask of the world.

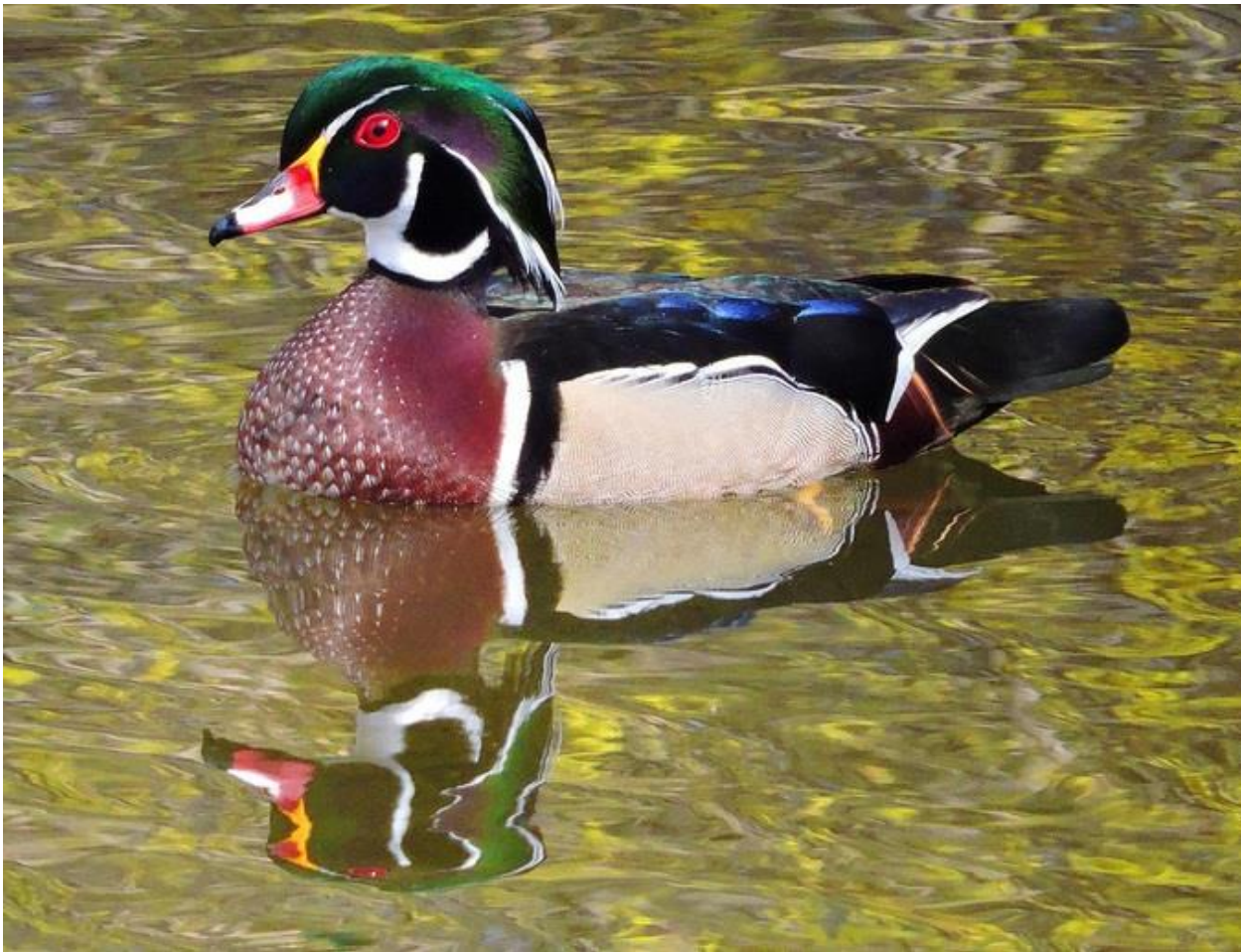
Given everything working against wild birds in our region, it feels like the right thing to do. Feeding them may produce more benefits than negatives. Whether to continue feeding birds in summer can be an ongoing debate that I will leave to experts for now. I'll at least continue feeding the hummingbirds.

So far, we have made demands on only enough crop land to grow two 40-pound bags of sunflower seed, one still unopened, two small bags of nyjer seed, one small bag of safflower seed, and one small bag of peanuts. The peanut butter was old and the suet mostly fat drained from a Christmas ham. Better yet if plantings around your yard help support native birds. For us, just letting Gray Dogwood and Riverbank Grape expand in our front yard helped by providing a little food and cover.

Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park Grant North American Wetlands Conservation Act Ducks Unlimited

On February 24, the TLC was informed that we were awarded a grant of \$100,000 for land acquisition through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, Small Grants Program. This funding should be available later this year and will be used to purchase more property for the Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park project north of Port Huron. The TLC thanks Kali Rush, Regional Biologist with Ducks Unlimited, for her work in applying for this grant on our behalf, as she has on two other federal grant applications. Kali and Ducks Unlimited will administer the grants for the TLC, which anyone familiar with government grants knows can be a daunting task. In return, Ducks Unlimited receives a small percentage of the funding.

The North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) was enacted in 1989 to provide federal cost-share funding to support the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, an international agreement that provides a strategy for the long-term protection of wetlands and associated uplands habitats needed by waterfowl and other migratory birds in North America. NAWCA funding is provided through a competitive grant-based program. Our Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park project is a nice fit for NAWCA funding because of the large amount of wetland to be protected in the beach ridge and swale complex, the significance of the associated upland beach ridges to the habitat, the close proximity of the park to Lake Huron, and the importance of this coastal habitat to migratory birds.



We see Wood Ducks in our Dead End Woods Sanctuary and the new Bidwell Sanctuary looks like great habitat for them, in addition to many other migratory bird species confirmed there. Photo via <https://www.goodfreephotos.com/> Good Free Photos

The North American Wetlands Conservation Council (NAWCC) created the Small Grants Program in 1996 to encourage new grantees and partners to carry out smaller-scale, long-term wetlands conservation projects that may otherwise not be able to compete in the larger Standard Grants Program. For 2021, the NAWCC set aside \$3 million for small grants. Only 30 eligible small grant proposals were received requesting a total of about \$2.8 million. Ducks Unlimited submitted 9 of these proposals requesting nearly \$850,000. NAWCC staff reviewed the proposals and recommended 28 of the 30 for funding. The NAWCC approved all 28, totaling about \$2.6 million, which included \$100,000, or almost 4% of the total funding, awarded to the TLC for our Southern Lake Huron Coastal Park project.

Ducks Unlimited began in 1937 as an organization focused exclusively on protecting ducks and other waterfowl game species. In recent years, the organization has expanded their work through an ecosystem approach that benefits a broad range of species and habitats. Many different environmental organizations have similarly expanded their work, realizing

more and more how inter-connected everything is. As a result, Ducks Unlimited has been working with a growing number of partners dedicated to protection of the natural environment, particularly wetlands, for many different reasons. The following article describes the expanded approach: <https://www.ducks.org/conservation/national/ducks-and-a-lot-more?poe=conservation>

Thank you Kali Rush, Ducks Unlimited, and the North American Wetlands Conservation Council. It's nice to see this interest and investment on a federal level in the coastal wetlands of the lower Thumb region.

Bidwell Sanctuary

Southern Lake Huron Coastal Trail

Burtchville Township, Saint Clair County

Work has continued on our new Bidwell Sanctuary in Burtchville Township. The entrance is now fully cleared, allowing for plenty of parking space off Metcalf Road. This part of the sanctuary was a former residence, demolished years ago, and was covered by weedy vegetation. Clearing has also continued on the foot trail to the north, part of the Southern Lake Huron Coastal Trail.

Back in November, the TLC enlisted the help of Justin Peltz, son-in-law of TLC member Brian Martin. Justin is very interested in natural area stewardship. He cleared honeysuckle shrubs and cut several Black Locust and Black Walnut saplings. As the snow cover recedes, we will continue trail clearing to the north.

Justin is 31 with a family of three, soon to be four. He's had a love for nature for as long as he can remember. He was brought up gardening and started hunting in his early twenties. Justin appreciates access to public lands and supports the mission of TLC. He believes people need to have wild places to experience nature. Justin feels that working with the TLC is a rewarding way he can help people connect with nature. He's glad to be a part of the TLC and excited to see what the future holds for our organization.

Thank you also to TLC members Tom and Laurie Dennis for continuing clean-up of refuse near the old residence and cutting invasive shrubs. If you would like to help, please contact us. We have a lot of clearing to do yet, and eventually will need building materials and labor for the park entrance.



Justin Peltz cutting up a Black Walnut tree.

TLC Member Profile

Tom and Laurie Dennis

Most people active in environmental circles in the Port Huron area probably know Tom and Laurie Dennis. We first met them in the late 1990's while working to protect a large population of State Endangered Painted Trillium – *Trillium undulatum* near Wadhams. The property was to be developed, but with the help of many donors, 9 acres was preserved as the Sharon Rose Leonatti Memorial Nature Sanctuary owned by the Michigan Nature Association. We discovered Tom and Laurie through the Master Gardeners and Blue Water Audubon Society, both groups donating to purchase the property and helping us run our annual Painted Trillium Tour.



Tom and Laurie Dennis.

Tom and Laurie have always been there to help us, and we have returned the favor a few times, but probably not enough. Around 2000, they hosted a meeting at their house in one of our earliest attempts to protect the Bidwell Sanctuary property in Burtchville. Since 2010, they have served as stewards of our Peltier Beach Ridge Sanctuary. They scouted a few properties for us and may have even helped with a covert plant rescue. They provided the TLC with several opportunities to make presentations to various groups. If we need bird information, we know who to call – Tom and Laurie. Most recently, they have been cleaning-up refuse and cutting invasive shrubs on the Bidwell Sanctuary. Tom gave a blessing at our dedication ceremony in July, the day we closed on the Bidwell Sanctuary.

Tom and Laurie are active members of Blue Water Audubon Society, Port Huron Civic Theater, Ross Bible Church, Tapestry Garden Club, Blueways of St. Clair, and they are stewards of the Blue Water Riverwalk with Friends of the St. Clair River. They have both served as officers in the Master Gardener Program and Blue Water Audubon Society. They also serve as Michigan Conservation Stewards, a Michigan State University Extension program. They speak locally on many gardening and natural science topics; always with an

emphasis on and love for creation. Both Tom and Laurie have attained Advanced Master Gardener status and Tom has degrees from Michigan State University in Zoology and Biology. Laurie is the consummate organizer and administrative planner, helping to organize the annual Saint Clair County Earth Fair among other events. Laurie also worked briefly as a field assistant for Huron Ecologic on a few wetland projects.

Most importantly, Tom and Laurie are grandparents to nine grandchildren. When they are not busy with a group or with their family, which is hard to imagine, they tend to their bird and butterfly-friendly gardens at their home in Fort Gratiot.

Thank you Tom and Laurie. Finding help for environmental work in our area can be difficult. You have been an exceptional bright spot. We are very grateful for your participation in the TLC.

Barred Owl Introduction

by Bill Collins

I first learned about Barred Owls back in 1978 while working on summer camp staff at Silver Trails Scout Reservation as an assistant to Nature Director, Chris Walker. Among other things, Chris was known to suddenly bust out with a Barred Owl "*Who cooks for you all*" call for no apparent reason. I'm not sure that we ever heard a real Barred Owl ... just Chris. I guess it was enough to qualify him to serve on our TLC Executive Board about 35 years later.

In 1982 and 83, I had several biology courses at SC4 taught by the well-known "*Bio*" Bob Collins. Although Bob shared my father's name, we were not related. However, Bob was my favorite teacher at SC4 and also a friend. We were introduced a few years earlier by Chris Walker up at Silver Trails and at meetings of the Blue Water Audubon Society. I was following course work for engineering, but one day, Bob suggested I take his biology courses just to make my interest in nature official. It was a good idea.

For one course, Bio Bob required us to keep a note book of nature observations for the semester. Shortly after an owl-calling trip with the Blue Water Audubon Society, I determined to call owls out in the swamp at the Dead End Woods, located at the dead end of Wilson Drive in Fort Gratiot. This would become the first TLC preserve 25 years later. On a very cold and windy early morning in late February or early March, not unlike our recent weather, I walked down to the Dead End Woods at about 4:30 and stood on snow-covered ice amongst the large swaying Silver Maple and Green Ash trees, clouds racing overhead, shredded by the wind which seemed to fan the brightly burning stars beyond.

I learned from the Blue Water Audubon Society field trip how to imitate a Screech Owl call by whistling, and I knew to call them first. Calling Great Horned Owls first would scare away the Screech Owls because Great Horned Owls eat them. So, I called and called for Screech Owls, starting with their shrill whistle and descending tremolo, followed by a low fluttering that sounds a bit like a woodpecker tapping on a large bamboo log, which probably doesn't happen much in Michigan. After quite a while, there was no response. It was probably just too windy. Still calling, something caught my attention up in a tree branch not far in front of me. I shined my flashlight and there, probably not more than 20 feet away and about 15 feet up was this large ghostly being staring at me with coal black eyes, wondering what I was doing in its woods at such an hour. It was about 2 feet tall with a big white round face and prominent vertical markings running the length of its breast. It was a Barred Owl, the first one I ever saw. We looked at each other for a while, it being quite critical of my light shining in its face. A magical experience I will never forget.

My only other encounter with Barred Owls was in 2015 while flagging wetland along a proposed route for the new Karegnondi water line southwest of Columbiaville near the border of Lapeer County and Genesee County. I was way down in a swamp surrounded by mature forest when I heard two Barred Owls break out in a wild series of cackles, hoots, and crows for which they are known. As I got closer, I watched them flying from tree to tree. Fortunately, the water line route was changed and their forest home remained undisturbed.

Some of you have probably seen bird articles written by Tom Dennis in the Times Herald or on the Blue Water Healthy living web site: <https://bluewaterhealthyliving.com/>. Tom has generously agreed to provide us with his articles, starting with the following about the Barred Owl.

Barred Owl, *Strix varia*

by Tom Dennis

A good friend recently sent me the link to an article entitled, *Birds are 'winged words'*. She knew I would love this read and I think Karrie will enjoy my article (and thoughts) on the Barred Owl, a bird that brings great enjoyment every time I hear them "talk".

Like most owls, Barred Owls are mostly nocturnal; night creatures that spend the daylight hours resting and hiding, and therefore the best way to experience them is to listen for them at night. They also tend to forage and feed at dusk and dawn, the "ten-dollar-word" for this behavior is "crepuscular". They are a medium-sized owl with a wingspan of up to 49 inches and an average height of 24 inches. They have a large round head without "ear" tufts and have concentric brown and white rings on the face centered by dark brown eyes that

distinguish them from other local owls as they all have yellow eyes. The upperparts of their body are brown with white spots and bars; and the underparts are buff to white with brown streaks. The short, broad tail is trimmed with wide brown and white bars. They were created with the standard predator weaponry of long, sharp claws and a curved, sharp beak. The sexes are similar in color with females slightly larger in size and pairs are monogamous with observations indicating that they mate for life.



Barred Owl by Mdf - Taken by Mdf, CC BY-SA 3.0,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=261200>

Barred Owls are perfectly designed for night-time hunting with their large eyes that have a large number of rod cells (light sensors) and a very sensitive retina for sending signals to the brain. Like most owls, they fly silently due to their wing and feather design and they are successful since they can surprise even the most wary prey. The feather covered ears are offset from each other giving them the ability to accurately triangulate their preys' position and they hunt from a perch that allows them to use their high weight to wing-span ratio to their advantage.

Barred Owls are year-round residents of the eastern United States, most of Canada, the extreme north-western United States and portions of central and southern Mexico. Their

preferred habitats include wet forests, wooded swamps and mature woodlands near abundant water where they nest in cavities or use abandoned hawk, crow, or squirrel nests. They feed on a large variety of animals including small fish, many small mammals up to the size of squirrels, young rabbits, and opossums; reptiles, amphibians, large insects, scorpions, and finally crayfish which when eaten in large quantities cause belly feathers to show a pink flush!

And now, my favorite characteristic of the Barred Owl, their wonderful, unique, and entertaining “talk”. They have a large repertoire of vocalizations with the best known a series of eight accented hoots with a downward pitch at the end that is described most commonly with the mnemonic method using the human phrase “*Who cooks for you, who cooks for you all.*” The “*you all*” has the pitch drop reminiscent of a Southern lady or gentleman using these two words at the end of a sentence! If you are fortunate enough to hear two or more of these owls communicating, you will be treated to a variety of cackles, hoots, caws, screams, and crackles that has best been described as “sudden demonic laughter”. When I’ve had occasion to witness this activity it sounds at the same time human and cat-like with a pitch suggestive of a crazed group of women (sorry ladies) enjoying a raucous celebration in a foreign language.

So I close by recommending that you find a nice quiet, wet woodland area and sit a while from early evening until midnight and listen to who and what shows up to entertain you. The disclaimer...best enjoyed in early spring or late fall unless accompanied by warm clothing or mosquito netting depending on the season. I hope you get to hear one or better yet a “parliament” of these wise creatures.

If you wish to learn more about birds you are welcome to attend Blue Water Audubon meetings held at The Point at 5085 Lakeshore Road in Fort Gratiot. Please visit our Facebook page, “Blue Water Audubon Society”, for meeting details and be sure to friend us.

Tom Dennis is a free-lance writer, passionate birder, zoologist, creation scientist, and naturalist.

Cemeteries As Resources

You may have read about the growing trend of “green burial” in which the deceased are buried without embalming and usually without a casket or vault. There are variations on this. Some choose not to have a head stone or any kind of grave marker. Imagine how many mountains have been quarried out for granite and limestone for headstones. Some

cemeteries are left in a natural and unmaintained condition. At some point, the TLC may get involved in protecting land for the purpose of green burials.

Short of that, there are opportunities at traditional cemeteries or memorial gardens to improve an ever expanding part of the world. Simple things include the installation of bird houses, planting of native vegetation and pollinator-friendly flowers, the creation of small water sources for wildlife. Beyond that, it's unlikely that cemetery managers will be convinced to restore an entire cemetery to a natural area, but it might be worth discussing the options.

Some might be offended at the thought, but with cemeteries taking up so much land, it would be nice to consider more of a multi-use philosophy, with small gardens, horticultural plantings, relatively undisturbed natural spots, native plantings that might serve as a botanical garden or an arboretum, walking paths, interpretive signs, birding trails, small historical displays, art installations, and so on. Some older urban cemeteries approach this somewhat multi-use design.

If none of this is possible, at least a little cemetery management reform might be encouraged. Many cemeteries, like Lakeside Cemetery in Port Huron, retain many of the original native oaks that covered the ancient beach ridges along Lake Huron. These trees have already been sourced for acorns to replant preserves in Fort Gratiot and Burtchville. Unfortunately, this precious reservoir of our native floral heritage is slowly disappearing as these old trees die or are cut down without the ability to reseed the mowed ground. Cemeteries should be encouraged to maintain nurseries where this native stock could be reproduced for future plantings. If nothing else, cemetery managers can help the world by eliminating invasive weeds like Day-lily, Lily-of-the-valley, and Periwinkle that are so ubiquitous at cemeteries.

Have you ever considered the amount of refuse generated by the typical cemetery? Check the dumpsters or the piles out back. So many flowers, both real and plastic, are discarded, along with wreaths, grave blankets, potting soil, plastic vases, pinwheels, American flags, and now solar-powered LED lights. Who would have thought to go looking for solar cells, lights, and rechargeable batteries at a cemetery? A lot of this stuff is in good condition but removed on a seasonal basis to make room for new materials. At some cemeteries, all of this refuse is piled out back, usually on a hillside or in wetland, and buried by fill to expand for new grave sites. What will future generations think of us when they find we buried solar cells, LED lights, and batteries containing metals and other scarce or highly processed materials in a graveyard while we ripped up other parts of the earth to get more? Are there no better uses for these items than to serve as fill, or to be sent to a landfill? How about at least composting the plant materials? Could plastic flowers, vases, and other items be given to nursing homes or resold? Could the American flags be reused? Where is the patriotic

outrage? Need plants for your flower bed, lights for your porch or garden path? Check out the trash at a cemetery.



Black Oaks on an ancient beach ridge at Lakeside Cemetery in Port Huron.



Items recovered from a cemetery including almost new plastic flowers, a pinwheel, an American flag, and 4 LED lights with solar cells.

If you are interested in working with cemeteries on these issues or heading up an effort to acquire land for green burials, please contact the TLC.

Jean Sibelius and His Birds

Since the theme of this newsletter leans toward birds, and the earliest spring migrations are now upon us, the Red-winged Blackbirds, Robins, and Killdeer returned, and flocks of Canada Geese and Tundra Swans overhead, it's a very good time to contemplate the music of Jean Sibelius. For anyone familiar with classical music, especially of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, chances are you know about the great Finnish composer Jean Sibelius. His work, "*Finlandia*" gets a lot of air time on classical stations, but unfortunately at the expense of his other great music. Short of giving you a full biography of Sibelius, suffice it to say that he is

considered a national treasure of Finland and by many, a classical music great on the order of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Tchaikovsky, Dvorak, Rachmaninoff, and other prominent composers.



Sibelius as the Composer of En saga, 1894. Triptych by Akseli Gallen-Kallela. Ainola Foundation, Jarvenpää, Finland.

An important thing to know about Sibelius is that he was very inspired by nature, particularly the native waterfowl around his country home, named "*Ainola*" after his wife Aino, on Lake Tuusula in southern Finland where he and his family lived for many years through the end of his life. From the time he was a boy, Sibelius loved nature and wandered the countryside, some say even with his violin in-hand. He became a birder of sorts in later life. He frequently walked the fields and forest around Ainola with his binoculars, watching cranes, swans, geese, curlews, and other birds of Lake Tuusula and the surrounding marshes. His biographer wrote that even by Nordic standards, Sibelius response to nature was exceptional, savoring the fullness of spring blossoms as much as the scents and colors of autumn.



Sibelius at Ainola. Finnish Museum of Photography, Finnish National Board of Antiques.

Sibelius was musically inspired by many things, including folklore, mythology, poetry, literature, Finnish nationalism, religious themes, and a desire to express his emotions. He was deeply impacted early on by the death of one of his daughters, which he said influenced all of his work from that point forward. But no matter the subject or mood, a common thread through most of Sibelius' music seems to be the rhythms, tones, and textures of Finnish nature. His later works especially conjure skies, landscapes, forests, meadows, marshes, waters, winds, the flora and fauna, bird song, and particularly, the flight of the waterfowl around his home that he loved.

Following are the titles of only a few of his compositions ranging from the late 1800's through the early 1900's: *"Water Drops"*, *"When Spring Once More Comes to Life"*, *"Imagine, See How the Bird Swoops"*, *"Neath the Fir Trees"*, *"Dragon Fly"*, *"Outside It Is Growing Dark"*, *"The Trush's Toiling"*, *"The Fool's Song of the Spider"*, *"Driftwood"*, *"Row, Row Duck"*, *"The Breaking of the Ice on the River Oulu"*, *"Sigh, Sedges Sigh"*, *"The Diamond on the March Snow"*, *"High Are the Snowdrifts"*, *"Hail, Oh Moon!"*, *"Thou Who Guidest the Stars"*, *"Scene with Cranes"*, *"The River and the Snail"*, *"The Lizard"*, *"I Am a Tree"*, *"The Spirit of Nature"*, *"When the Mountain Ash is Blooming"*, *"The Solitary Fir Tree"*, *"The Aspen"*, *"The Birch"*, *"The Spruce"*, *"The Wayfarer and the Stream"*, *"On the Mountain"*, *"The Primrose"*, *"The*

Flowers: Bellis, Oeillet, Iris, Aquileja, Campanula”, “*The Flower's Destiny*”, “*The Roaring of a Wave*”, “*One Hears the Storm Outside*”, “*Song of the Earth*”, and “*Hymn of the Earth*”. These titles don't even include his seven symphonies, various suites, tone poems, and other major works which are full of nature-inspired titles and themes.



Sibelius sitting at Ainola. Yle, Finnish Broadcasting Company, <https://svenska.yle.fi/a/7-885101>

It's interesting to see some of his other work in the title list. Sibelius was apparently a supporter of the Scouting movement which began while he was still very actively composing in his early 40's. I'm sure Sibelius would have found a kindred spirit in Ernest Thompson Seton, co-founder of the Boy Scouts of America. He wrote a “*Scout March*” and much later, “*The World Song of the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts*”. Also interesting that in 1925, he wrote three pieces that seem to fit together as I imagine him cross-country skiing through the forest: “*The Lonely Ski Trail*”, “*A Happy Musician*”, and “*God's Blessing*”. The title of one of Sibelius' last works seems to express a contentment with a simple life he shared with his wife at their lake house, and perhaps an emerging environmental ethic: “*We Ask for Nothing Rich or Rare*”.



Jean and Aino Sibelius at Ainola in 1915. Photograph by Eric Sundström, Hgin City Museum.

His well known “*Karelia Suite*” was inspired by his honeymoon trip with his wife to the beautiful Karelia region along the border of Finland and Russia. It was a very happy time in their life and this is some of his happiest music. Karelia is also the home of the “*Kalevala*”, an epic work of poetry first published in 1835, based on Finnish folklore and mythology. Paradoxically perhaps, the Kalevala later served as inspiration for some of Sibelius' darkest and most melancholic music.

Karelia Suite: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=adKwG9ZuzFw>

The influence of nature grew significantly in the later works of Sibelius. He wrote his Fifth Symphony at his lake home of Ainola during World War I. He wrote in his diary, “*Every day I have seen the cranes. Flying south in full cry with their music. Have been yet again their most assiduous pupil. Their cries echo throughout my being.*” In April of 1915 he saw 16 swans flying over his house, inspiring him to write the last movement, which he called his “swan hymn”. You can definitely hear the rhythm of waterfowl on the wing. About the sixteen swans flying in formation over Ainola, Sibelius wrote in his diary, “*One of my greatest experiences!*”. “*Lord God, that beauty! They circled over me for a long time. Disappeared into*

the solar haze like a gleaming, silver ribbon ... That this should have happened to me, who have so long been the outsider." The swans reappeared three days later. He wrote: *"The swans are always in my thoughts and give splendor to [my] life. [It's] strange to learn that nothing in the whole world affects me - nothing in art, literature, or music - in the same way as do these swans and cranes and wild geese. Their voices and being."*

Symphony 5: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAFouzo3ZHQ>

Essentially rejecting much of his earlier work, Sibelius tried to abandon the form he developed in his Fifth Symphony and endeavored to compose continuous sound with no formal divisions or movements in his Sixth Symphony. He wanted to transcribe the noise of nature, believing he heard chords in the forests and lakes. He once gave a lecture to Finnish students on the overtone series of a meadow. Sibelius had an immense struggle with his Sixth, but when finally completed, said it reminded him of the scent of the first snow. He said of his Sixth Symphony, *"Whereas most other modern composers are engaged in manufacturing cocktails of every hue and description, I offer the public pure cold water"*. Taken metaphorically, the symphony gives us a taste of pure spring water from the depths of the Finnish forest. Sibelius may have spiked his comment with a little humor as he had a close relationship with alcohol for many years.

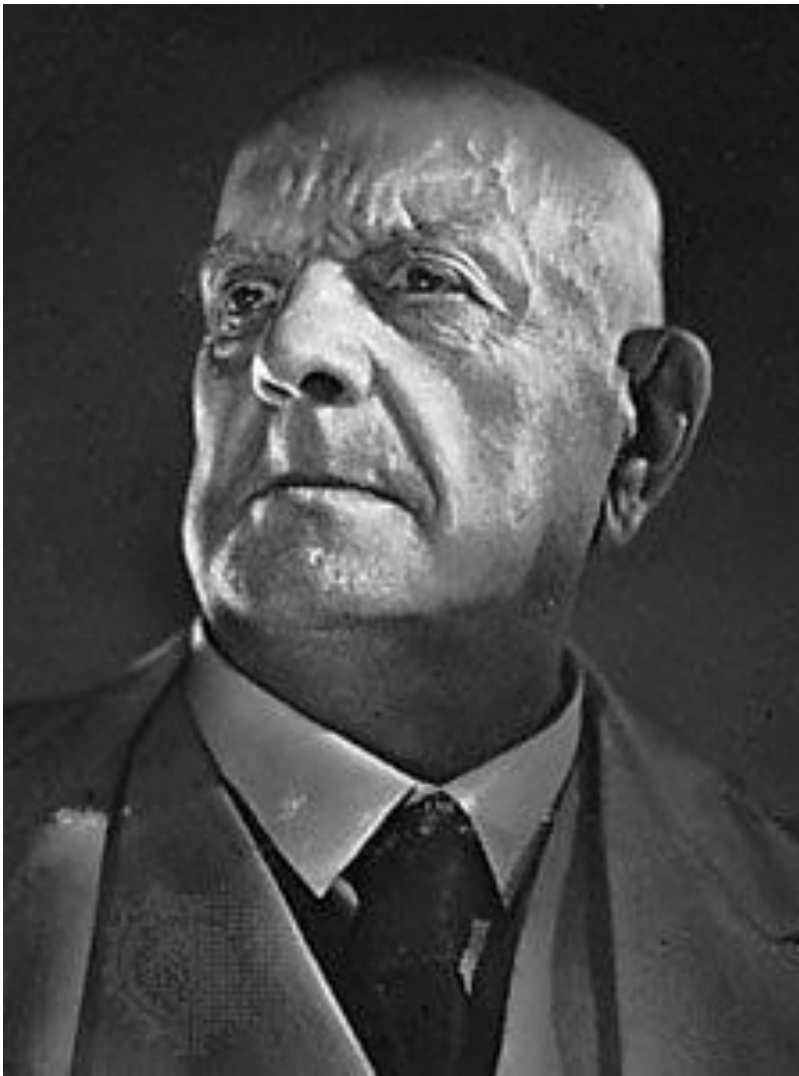
Symphony 6: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FChg3ERp6C8>

Sibelius completed his Seventh Symphony in 1924, the last of his published symphonies. It consists of only one movement, extending freely and naturally from start to finish. It seems like his attempt to give the world a symphony as uninhibited by structure as the Finnish wilds that so inspired him. Perhaps this singular quality represented a unity, as a world in a grain of sand.

Symphony 7: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHHfvdAqvn8>

The forests surrounding his home at Ainola are said to have been a major influence on his later composition of *"Tapiola"* about the forest spirit *"Tapio"* from the *"Kalevala"*. Lest you think this Finnish mythology stuff is completely foreign, the little town of Kaleva, Michigan, located about halfway between Ludington and Traverse City, was founded by Finnish immigrants and named for the Kalevala.

Tapiola: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrk6oMm2T-Y>



Sibelius at Ainola, 1949. Photograph by Yousuf Karsh.

Some have described the music of Sibelius as a romantic-heroic representation of the Finnish landscape. Earlier composers, such as Beethoven, are known for their “pastoral” symphonies and other works depicting nature, but Sibelius took it to a new level. In the late 1800's, more so through the turn of the century, classical music was shifting away from the more traditional Romantic era and into the less structured Modernist era. The Impressionists of this time increasingly incorporated natural themes in their works. Claude Debussy is usually credited with turning the tide in his 1894 masterpiece, “*Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*”. However, as some writers point out, Sibelius' equally impressionist and powerful 1893 work, “*The Swan of Tounela*”, predates Debussy by one year.

The Swan of Tounela: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjyLWoJvtME>

What sets Sibelius apart is that nature is not only a theme in his music, but also a permeating form. Like nature, his later music has been described as “metamorphic” in structure, starting with an idea that organically changes or is lost, and usually without definite boundaries or divisions. In his personal striving for a pure and amorphous style, while retaining the influence of earlier Romantic composers, Sibelius, perhaps unknowingly, pioneered a great change in Western classical music that continues to influence new composers.

Apparently, his Seventh Symphony was as far as he could go with the ideal of a boundless work. He labored for years on what was to be his eighth symphony, but finally one night, burned all of his manuscripts in the fireplace at Ainola. Maybe the only possibility in a natural progression was to release his music back to the universe. Whatever the reason, Sibelius was notably unburdened and free from that night on.

One September morning in 1957, he went for his usual walk in the fields and forest around Ainola, scanning the skies for cranes flying south for the winter. They were part of his autumn ritual. On the third-to-last day of his life, the cranes appeared. He told his wife, “*Here they come, the birds of my youth!*” One of the cranes broke from the flock, circled the house, cried out, and flew off to continue its journey with the others.

Ecology News

There was such a rush a fast-tracked bad news for the environment in the waning days of the Trump administration that it was hard to keep up. Thankfully, a lot of it has not yet amounted to much, or is being reversed by the Biden administration. Following is a brief summary of the more publicized of those actions.

How Biden is Reversing Trump's Assault on the Environment

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/feb/02/biden-trump-environment-climate-crisis>

Tracking Biden's Environmental Actions

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2021/climate-environment/biden-climate-environment-actions/>

Center for Biological Diversity

<https://biologicaldiversity.org/>

Administration Lawsuit Tracker

https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/trump_lawsuits/

While there is lots of very bad ecological news these days, we'll end on a positive note for our birds.

Migratory Bird Treaty Act

<https://www.npr.org/2021/03/09/975376670/biden-moves-to-make-it-illegal-again-to-accidentally-kill-migratory-birds>

TLC Membership

With your membership, the TLC is better enabled to protect important natural areas in our region. We offer three membership levels as shown below: Individual \$25, Family \$30, and Business \$100. Members will receive our e-mail news. Some of you are members based on your previous donations, volunteer efforts, or other help. You can also make donations in honor or memory of someone or something. For donations of \$100 or more, your name will be listed on our web site. For larger donations, please contact us for details. You may print and complete the form below. Make checks payable to "Thumb Land Conservancy". Mail checks and forms to: Thumb Land Conservancy, 4975 Maple Valley Road, Marlette, Michigan 48453

To download and print the membership form, click [HERE](#).

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