



# Nature experts share favorite area sights

By KRISTEN COUNTS  
Special to the Record-Eagle

Local naturalists are grabbing their binoculars and heading outdoors this spring, not wanting to miss any of the action occurring among flora and fauna in our region. These expert nature-watchers shared their favorite places to visit during the spring and summer months.

Brightly colored warblers and a thick carpet of white trillium are just a couple of the awe-inspiring sights on South Manitou Island. Tom Ford of Wild Birds Unlimited in Traverse City and a wildlife artist highly recommended visiting the island in the spring.

"Mother's Day weekend is a pretty safe bet for the peak of the wildflowers," he said. Conveniently, that weekend is also usually the first run of the ferry, round trip from Leland to South Manitou.

An abundance of wildlife can be found along the Crystal River, a shallow river that well emulates its name, in the Glen Arbor area. Out of three naturalists, two picked this location as one of their favorites in the spring. According to Rob Karner, Director of Studies at The Leelanau School, the varied wildlife includes mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish and wildflowers.

An avid nature-watcher, he said, "It (the Crystal River) gives me the pleasure of seeing nature at its finest."

"For many of us, the most interesting part of nature television programs is watching the hunting and catching of prey," said

Record-Eagle file photo  
**South Manitou Island is a popular destination for both campers and day visitors.**

Karner, "which can be seen on the Crystal River."

An observer might spot an otter catching fish or a raccoon eating crayfish. Muskrat, beaver, mink and coyote also do some hunting along the river.

Mary Rupert, director of the Shielding Tree Nature Center in Maple City, said, "I love the Crystal River, just being out on the water (in a canoe) in the spring, before the visitors come." She enjoys the play of light through the water and the simple sound of water flowing.

"It's a totally different experience watching nature from the water."

Rupert said that the silent paddling of the canoe is not too disruptive to wildlife, allowing those in the canoe to observe unobtrusively. Loons, a characteristically shy waterfowl, will come right near her canoe; and she occasionally sees an eagle or an osprey catching a fish.

Karner likes to explore the Crystal for a number of comically named fish. Horny-head chub, pug-nosed dace and sand shiner are a few that he mentioned.

"The steelhead is the most comical," he said, explaining that at the height of spawning, it will come a foot and a half out of the water. Fondly, he remembered a graduation ceremony that was interrupted by this steelhead mating dance. They made such a raucous in the Crystal River that he left the nearby podium to investigate, surprised to not find students doing the splashing.



Other fish behaviors that can easily be observed in the shallow waters of the Crystal are predator-prey and territory protection.

The migration of hawks is a majestic sight to see in the spring, according to Ford, an avid bird-watcher. Opting to fly over the Leelanau Peninsula instead of the surrounding water, hawks receive a "boost" of thermal energy from the land, providing pockets of air that provide some lift.

To get to this prime migration spot, follow State Rd. 201 in Northport and look for a field on the west side of the road, just south of the State Park in Northport.

A sign posted there offers information about hawk migration.

"The most dramatic wildlife setting you'll see here is the large number of geese, swans and ducks on the shoreline of the big lake (Lake Michigan)," said

Karner. His favorite beaches are on Sleeping Bear and Good Harbor bays, both located between Glen Arbor and Leland. "It's not uncommon to see a thousand gulls in one spot on one shoreline. That's a concentration of wildlife that you don't see in other ecosystems. It's nature on a grand scale."

"In the spring, many fish die off,

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