

# Answering Your Questions About Animals on Mackinac Island

This column is one which I like to call a bits-and-pieces column. Over the last couple of weeks, a number of people have asked me a variety of questions about natural history subjects. So I thought I would share some of the answers with everyone.

In the last few weeks, as all the spring flowers began to bloom in gardens and in the woods, a number of pollinators have appeared, including bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds. A friend asked me, "Where do hummingbirds go for the winter? Do they migrate, and where do they go, as they're quite small birds?"

First off, only one species of hummingbird is commonly seen in eastern North America, and that is the ruby-throated hummingbird, so most of my comments will pertain to this species. There are a number of other species along the west coast and in Mexico. Hummingbirds are indeed the smallest of our North American birds, and they have long, slender bills for sucking nectar from tubular flowers. Their wing beat is so rapid that it makes a humming sound that can be heard from some distance. In fact, when they hover to feed, their wings beat at a rate of 55 times per second, 61 times per second when they fly backwards (yes, they can fly backwards), and 75 times per second when fly-



## Nature Notes

By Patricia Martin



ing forward. The male ruby-throat is distinguished by having a dark red throat, glittering green crown and upper parts, and grayish-white under parts. The females lack the red throat. These tiny birds weigh about one-tenth of an ounce and are only about three inches long, yet they can and do migrate long distances. They spend their winters in north central Mexico to central Costa Rica, and a few spend the winter in south Florida. In the spring, they head north and can be found throughout much of the eastern United States and southern Canada during the summer breeding season.

The next question that caught my attention had to do with raccoons. As most of the folks who live on Mackinac know, some years we've had more than an abundance of raccoons hanging out on the Island, while in other years there haven't been so many. Part of this may be owing to

predation of the young by coyotes or other predators. The question I was asked was, "How closely related are raccoons and bears?"

Raccoons and bears are in the same order, which is Carnivora (carnivore), but then again so are foxes and coyotes. Bears are in the family Ursidae, whereas raccoons are in the family Procyonidae. Both of these organisms have large canine teeth, indicating their place among the carnivores, but both bears and raccoons are omnivores, eating both plants and animals. The teeth of both indicate their eating habits. The carnassial pair of teeth are weakly developed in the raccoon and provide minimal shearing action. Both bears and raccoons have anterior cheek teeth, which are not well developed, but those in the rear are large and well suited for crushing. Both raccoons and bears are plantigrade, meaning that they walk on the soles of their feet, and both have five-clawed toes on each foot. It's not a wonder that people think that these animals are fairly closely related.

By the way, for those of you who don't live here, we've not had a wild bear on the Island since sometime in the 1930s or 1940s. I haven't seen many raccoons on the Island this spring; however, I've heard a few reports about one or more hiding out in the attic of a cottage.

The third bit of information that I wanted to share this week is in the form of an observation rather than a question. A friend of mine, who is

an avid bird observer, commented that he had seen an unusual incident near his cottage. He had observed a crow, that is an American crow, not a raven, swoop down into his yard and carry off a young Eastern cottontail rabbit. This happened not once, but twice. I am in no way upset about there being one or two fewer bunnies on the Island, since Eastern cottontails were introduced to the Island only a decade or two ago. (The Snowshoe hare is our native lagomorph). Since they were let go, they have, well, bred like rabbits, and they often can be seen around town eating gardens, much to the dismay of the gardeners. Until this incident, I had never heard of crows eating rabbits, but I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Their diet is quite varied and includes insects, other invertebrates, carrion, small vertebrates, bird eggs, nestlings, seeds, fruits, and nuts. They've even been known to pick up mollusks and drop them from a height to break the shell so they can eat the

meat inside. The fact is, they eat just about anything. So I guess we can add crows to the list of organisms that help keep the rabbit population in check. This list includes hawks, owls, eagles, the Great Blue Heron, foxes, coyotes, and dogs, all of which help to control the population of these little bunnies.

If any of you have questions, or see an unusual natural history event, give me a call or write me. I love to hear from you. I'd also like to encourage you to take time to walk in the woods. Some of the spring flowers are passing, but there are still trillium, and the yellow lady's slipper orchids are blooming. Many of our summer birds have returned and you can hear them calling, including the black-throated green warbler and great crested flycatcher, among others.

*Trish Martin is a year-around resident of Mackinac Island, has earned a master's degree in botany from Central Michigan University, and owns Bogon Lane Inn.*

## Judie and Joe Kubal Enjoy 30 Years of Mackinac Visits



Judie and Joe Kubal of Berwyn, Illinois, have been coming to Mackinac Island since their honeymoon in 1977, and will be married 30 years on June 25. They also celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary on the Island and renewed their wedding vows at St. Anne's Church with Father Jim Williams conducting the ceremony. The couple say they enjoy the entire Island. Now, they are spending four days at Grand Hotel and plan to be back in October for the "Somewhere In Time" weekend.

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