

Nature Center's a half hour away

Just a half hour's drive from the hustle and bustle of suburbia is a quiet haven for wildlife and an environmental education for its visitors.

The 140-acre Drayton Plains Nature Center includes ponds, marshlands, nature trails and a live animal and nature museum.

The center which serves southeastern Michigan offers year round programs for scores of persons from ranging from preschoolers to senior citizens.

One major aspect is the live animal museum, the only one of its kind in the Lower Peninsula, which provides care for injured or orphaned wildlife until they are able to take care of themselves. They are then released in a habitat in which they can survive.

Steve Vandembark is the energetic director of the center. Along with his associate Michael Van Gordon, a naturalist, he guided

2,900 school children through the center since May 1.

Outside the large, two-story white frame building which once served as headquarters for the Drayton Plains Fish Hatchery, all is peaceful as ducks scoot about the property and a gently warm breeze carries the sounds of the birds.

Inside phones ring continuously as callers ask how to care for abandoned baby birds and receive a feeding recipe.

Between phone calls, a volunteer hand-feeds tiny rabbits and opossums which are huddled in cardboard boxes.

Throughout the small, live animal museum where animals recuperate in cages there are signs which stress that the center "is not a zoo. The animals seen here are either orphaned young or older animals that are injured. As soon as an animal is fit enough to take care

of itself, it is released back into the wild."

On the second floor where there is a lecture room for center visitors stuffed animals are displayed as they would be seen in natural habitats.

Programs offered through the year include fishing derbies, art exhibits, classes in natural handicrafts, talks on wildflowers, pond life, forests, animals and general nature study.

Visitors may hike the self-guided trail or they can arrange a guided group tour.

Already reserving time in October for school groups, Vandembark tells teachers that students visiting should be ready to explore a pond from the inside out.

Youngsters and teachers are expected to doff their shoes and wade through a pond to see how a muskrat really builds his house, stores his food and cuts channels through the pond.

"We call this the climatic approach," Vandembark said. "It involves kids in feeling their surroundings. It involves the use of the whole body with the de-emphasis of the eyes."

Trails include one for handicapped persons.

Hikers can observe the grassy hilltop prairies, glacial lakes abundant with wildlife, tall hardwood forests which surround cattail marshes and pine plantations.

Development of the center has been through private financing, annual contributions, memberships and small admission fees.

Vandembark and Van Gordon, are presently the only two persons on the center's payroll. The remainder of the work is handled by volunteers.

The unique center is located just east of Hatchery Road in Waterford Township. It is open to the public from 1 to 5 p.m. daily except Monday.

JUDY OWEN



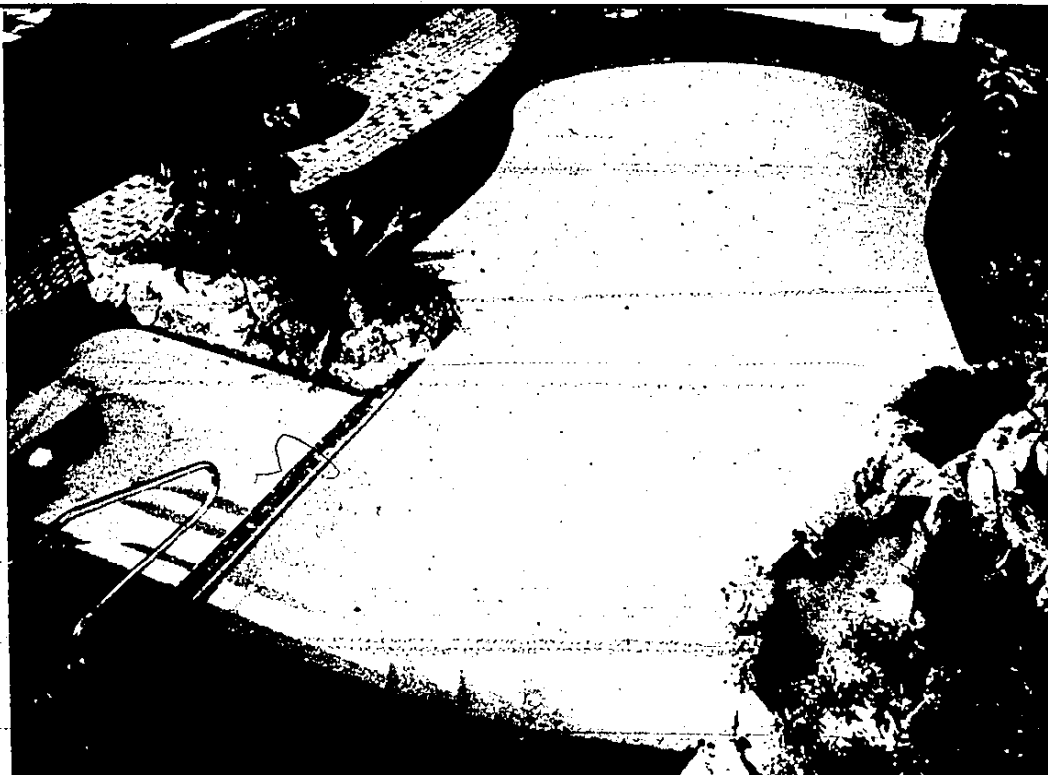
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