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Beaver Island conjures natural magic

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BEAVER ISLAND -- A quick stop was all we had planned for Greene's Lake. Shallow and swampy, the oblong lake near Beaver Island's southern end rarely makes the island's tourism brochures.

But as we stand at the lake's edge on a sunny early-summer afternoon, guide Carrie Myers spots a loon. And then another.

"Holy loon," her husband and guide partner Eric Myers exclaims. "And are those the frogs? They're starting to go. They've got the banjo chorus."

Soon, I'm getting the scoop on frog mating rituals as we listen to deep baritone croaks ping-ponging from one side, then another.

"They set up breeding territories, and the females will decide which has the best vegetation," Carrie explains, and Eric translates in the colorful language that likely keeps the attention of his students at Chicago's South Suburban College.

"They're saying, 'I'm the biggest, baddest frog in the pond. No, I'm the baddest frog in the pond.' Sometimes one will cross, and they'll actually wrestle."

Mud-wrestling never makes the itinerary for this day's outing with Beaver Island Ecotours. But then, we hadn't thought to wish for that.

We settle for the croaking chorus as our backdrop as we move closer to a family of turtles sunning itself on a log. A few redwing blackbirds chime in with short, high-pitched trills as Eric shares tree trivia, drawing on his Ph.D. in forestry from Michigan State University. The couple met on the island, while both were taking classes for their master's degree programs at the island's biological research station.

During a honeymoon ecotour on Australia's Great Barrier Reef, they got a brainstorm: launch their own tours of their beloved Beaver Island. They now offer summer tours on the island, this year starting June 9, and spend the rest of the year teaching college-level science.



Tiny movements catch Carrie's eye. She spots the snakes in the grass, the salamanders hiding under rocks, the green frogs (her research specialty) camouflaged in the muck, and now, some whirligigs on the surface of the otherwise still water. We just stand, staring at the fascinating reflections here on a lake with no human inhabitants anywhere nearby.

"There's something in the water. There's something in the water," Eric shouts, drawing our attention out toward the lake's center. "See it going across? I don't know what it is."

Something far larger than a turtle or frog is leaving a long wake on reflective surface, and it's heading (hint) toward the huge beaver lodge.

A snake? Not wiggly enough. A mink? None on the island.

"What else could it be? It's got to be a beaver," Carrie says. "But they're supposed to be sleeping."

We zoom in with the camera lens; sure enough, it's a beaver that Eric insists must have insomnia. All morning, he had emphasized what we would and wouldn't see, such as the "crepuscular" creatures (such as the deer) that are most active at dawn and dusk and the nocturnal ones, such as the beaver. But the island had other ideas.

"Wow," Eric exclaims. "This is the fourth time I've seen a beaver in 11 years of working on the island. But then weird stuff happens every tour. It just seems to work out. No one has requested as much as you have to see a beaver. It's like the island knows what you need and shows you."

He guided a group of avid birders recently, and all of the island's rarest species made an appearance, he said. "We saw an osprey dive, and a tern and a kingfisher. You just bring your wishes"

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