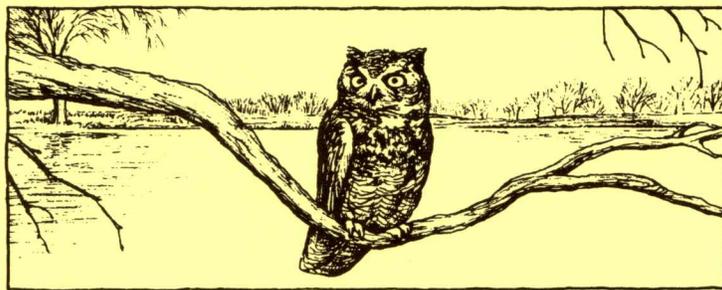


# STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



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## CRUSTACEANS AND CAJUNS: A Closer Look at Crayfish

-- Mark Spreyer

*You get a line and I get pole, now honey  
You get a line and I get pole, babe,  
You get a line and I get pole,  
We'll go down to the crawdad hole,  
Honey oh babe of mine.*

--Traditional Song

If the word crustacean reminds you of something you scraped off a boat once, you'd be right. Barnacles are crustaceans along with water fleas, shrimp, crabs, lobsters and crayfish.

*Crustacean* comes from the Latin word meaning "hard shell" and these animals are characterized by a tough exoskeleton along with numerous jointed legs.

Earlier today (this being the second week in May), a class from **Countryside School** caught many young crayfish during our pond study class (see *Programs* below). So let's get down to the crayfish, I mean, crawdad hole and take a closer look.

### Acadian Legend

Being a relative of the lobster, crawdads are often on the menu, particularly in Louisiana, where it is the state crustacean. How did Cajuns get so fond of their crayfish? That's a story that goes back centuries, to the Acadians.

The Acadians were French settlers of eastern Canada. There they lived and fished for cod, herring and their favorites, lobsters.

In the early 1700s, the British took control of Canada and the Acadians headed south for Louisiana, a French territory.

As you can imagine, these folks were sad to go but, as you might not be aware, the lobsters were sorry to see them leave. So, the lobsters decided to follow them by crawling along on the ocean's bottom.

It was a tough, long journey for the Acadians and the lobsters. When they arrived in Louisiana, both groups of refugees had lost a lot of weight and were much more wiry than they used to be.

The Acadians settled back in the freshwater swamps and the little lobsters followed along.

The lobsters watched as the French refugees built their homes in the swamps. While they had plenty of wood for walls and roofs, they had no stone to use for a fireplace or chimney.

They needed a safe fireplace in order to prepare all that fine Acadian food.

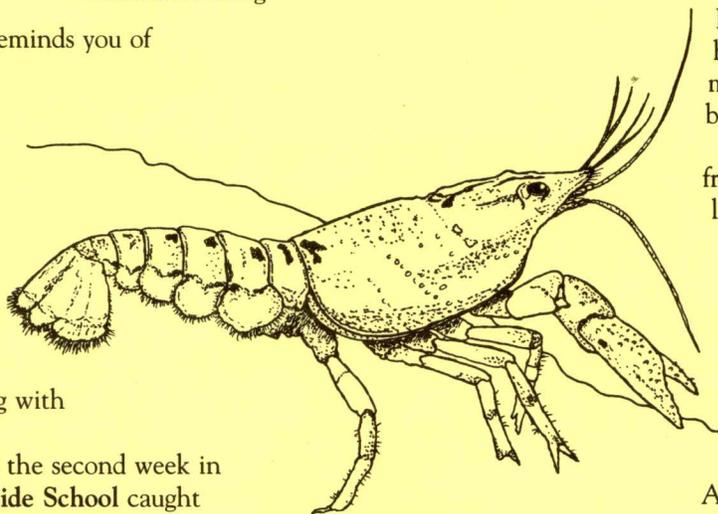
Well, the tiny lobsters had an idea.

It wasn't long before the Acadians noticed how their little multi-legged friends built chimneys out of mud. Soon, their cabins were outfitted with mud fireplaces and chimneys.

Names change over time and the Acadians came to be known as Cajuns and the little lobsters had their French moniker simplified to crayfish or crawdad. And, to this day, the Cajuns still love their crawdads!

### Pincers & Burrows

*They got two big claws and eight tiny feet, now honey  
Two big claws and eight tiny feet, now babe,  
Two big claws and eight tiny feet,  
A tail full of meat that's good to eat,  
Honey oh babe of mine.*



# STILLMAN NATURE CENTER

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Yes, the song's right. Crayfish belong to a group of crustaceans known as the Decapoda meaning ten feet.

The first two legs carry large pincers that the crawdads use to excavate their burrows. Burrows in water, you ask? Yes and no.

Crayfish generally are found in lakes, streams, marshes and other wet areas. However, some of these wet refuges are temporary ponds and pools that dry out during warmer weather. Since crayfish filter oxygen through gills, the little crustaceans must maintain some contact with water.

Here in northern Illinois, three species solve this problem by digging burrows. Given that they have to reach the water table, these burrows can be quite deep. Is it any wonder that crayfish pincers push up noticeable "chimneys" of excavated soil.

### Predator or Protector?

The crawdad's large claws are also used to catch their prey which includes a wide variety of plants and animals, dead or alive. Some crayfish are particularly fond of snails. Their idea of escargot includes eating the shells which help strengthen their exoskeleton.

Interestingly, laboratory and field studies indicate that crayfish can significantly reduce populations of exotic zebra mussels living in streams.

Back to the pond study class mentioned earlier. When introducing the activity, I explain to the students that adult



dragonflies eat adult mosquitos in the air while dragonfly larvae, which use gills to breathe, eat mosquito larvae in the lake.

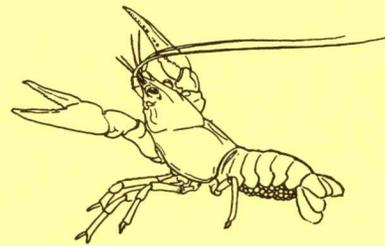
If given a chance, the omnivorous crayfish will snack on dragonfly larvae. So, if you are researching the

endangered Hine's emerald dragonfly here in northern Illinois, you might be unhappy to see crayfish chimneys turning up in your dragonfly study area. Think again.

Researchers from the Illinois Natural History Survey and the University of Illinois discovered that during dry periods, the larvae of the endangered dragonfly took refuge in the wet crayfish burrows.

As water levels dropped, the density of dragonfly larvae in crayfish burrows showed much lower fluctuations than those in a stream channel.

In addition, field experiments showed that if the crayfish were removed, the abundance of Hine's emerald dragonfly larvae was not significantly altered. So, there you have it. In order to help the prey, keep one of its predators around!



Female "in berry"

### Don't Pick the Berries

And where do populations of crayfish come from? Well, mature crayfish mate in winter. Once fertilized, the female applies a layer of glue to her underside and then curls her abdomen forward and

deposits the eggs in the glue. The female carrying eggs is said to be "in berry" as her eggs resemble tiny, spherical black berries.

Within a month or so, the eggs hatch. The young, which remain attached to their mother, look like miniature adult crayfish.

Should you encounter a crayfish with scores of tiny young clinging to its undercarriage, it is quite a sight. In fact, this sight greeted three of Stillman's regular volunteers.

Late this past March, **Susan Allman, Jill Kohler, and Daria Sapp**, saw a female crayfish, loaded with young, heading down one of Stillman's trails. Odds are, she had a burrow nearby. Not surprisingly, these volunteers said I should write about crayfish!

### One Last Thing

To give credit where credit is due, I heavily borrowed from Doug Elliot's wonderful CD titled *Crawdads, Doodlebugs & Creasy Greens* for the story of the Acadians and their lobsters.

But, Doug left out one detail. With a little crustacean watching, a refugee's early attempt to build a chimney ended in disaster. It collapsed and flattened the Acadian right by his log cabin. Of course, you know what was left? A crayfish and a crushed-cajun. O.K. I'll go now.

## PROGRAMS

**Program Basics:** TO MAKE RESERVATIONS for programs (except for bird banding open houses), PLEASE CALL US AT (847) 428-OWLS(6957), OR EMAIL STILLMAN AT: stillnc@flash.net. Remember to include your name, phone number, and the number of people that will be attending.

If less than 5 - 10 people (varying with the activity) have called two days prior to a program, the program could well be cancelled. So, don't forget to call the nature center in advance. If you discover that you are unable to attend, please call to cancel your reservations. This courtesy will be greatly appreciated.

### BIRD BANDING

Watch Mark Spreyer, a licensed bird bander, measure, weigh and record data about our resident and migratory birds. Birds are not caught in a predictable manner, so come prepared to hike the trails. With luck, you'll see a bird in the hand and two in the bush. If it is raining, the banding open house will be cancelled.

Dates: Sundays, June 5 & August 7  
Time: 9:00AM to Noon  
Fee: None



### SUNDAY MORNING BIRD WALKS

Mark Spreyer will lead a morning bird walk. Binoculars and field guides are a must. If you don't have any, don't worry, Stillman does. If it's raining, the activity will be cancelled.

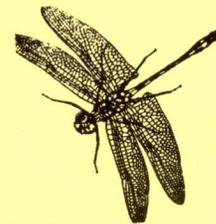
Date: Sundays: June 12 & Aug. 14  
Time: 8:00AM  
Fee: None  
Age: 10 years and up

### PRAIRIE RAMBLE

Our volunteers, under the leadership of **Daria Sapp**, have been working hard to get prairie plants growing in Stillman's "south forty." They've been quite successful and this is your chance to join Daria on a tour of this colorful site.

Date: Sunday, July 31  
Time: 2:00PM  
Fee: None

### YOGA on the TRAILS



Join us as yoga instructor **Evamarie Pilpuf** leads the group on a walk along the nature center's trails, pausing at regular intervals to engage in various yoga postures. A perfect way to combine the energizing benefits of yoga and fitness with the enjoyment of the outdoors. All levels are welcome; no prior yoga experience needed. Wear comfortable clothing and athletic shoes, and bring a large, old towel (for the times we sit on the ground).

If it's raining, the activity will be cancelled. *Please call (847) 428-OWLS to let us know if you plan to attend.*

Date: Saturday, Aug. 6  
Time: 10:00 - 11:30AM  
Age: 18 years and up  
Workshop Fee: \$7 members, \$10 non-members

### POND LIFE: From the Bottom Up

This afternoon, with the help of long-handled dip nets, visitors will scoop into our pond in hopes of **catching crayfish**, dragonfly larvae, tadpoles and other rarely seen pond inhabitants. Dress in clothes and shoes you don't mind getting muddy.

Date: Sunday, August 21  
Time: 2:00PM  
Fee: None



### THE TRIBUTE TREES

Tribute trees are planted to honor or celebrate persons or events that have touched our lives. In addition to the tree, most of which will be 2" in diameter at breast height, the honoree's name will appear on a small plaque which will be located on the white brick wall that parallels the entrance drive.

On occasion, one of the trees listed below is not available. Trees not on the list can be requested. So, don't hesitate to call with questions or to work out the details.

paperbark maple \$700.00	Kentucky coffeetree 650.00
black maple 500.00	swamp white oak 600.00
common alder 600.00	bald cypress 700.00
white alder 500.00	lacebark elm 600.00
river birch 650.00	black gum, 600.00
red maple 600.00	

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NATURE CENTER  
33 West Penny Road  
South Barrington, IL 60010  
(847) 428-OWLS  
Email: stillncc@flash.net  
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*If you aren't already a member, please consider joining us.*

Yes, I'd like to become a member of the Stillman Nature Center. I enclose my tax deductible contribution of \$\_\_\_\_\_.

I'd like to help as a volunteer with programs or land management at the Stillman Nature Center, please call me.

Please send a gift membership from \_\_\_\_\_ to the name and address listed below.

Name _____	Student/Senior . . . . . \$10.00
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