

TOLEDO OPERA ON WHEELS

OPERA ON WHEELS

The Bear Who Couldn't Fish

MUSIC BY MATTHEW FOSSA
LIBRETTO & BOOK BY JOSHUA BORTHS



Audience Guide

An original opera
exploring self-discovery
and the beauty of
nature

Directed by
James M. Norman

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Overview

The Bear Who Couldn't Fish is a 45-minute high-energy, original opera which takes place in the Great Lakes region where we live. Mato is a young bear who now has to live on his own. He learns valuable lessons from his fellow woodland friends—the Eagle, the Otter, and the Snake. Mato will succeed with help from his mom, the best teacher of all. Together, Mato and the students discover the importance of perseverance and the natural beauty of our environment.

Opera On Wheels Sponsors

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What is Opera?

Before the performance, ask your students for their ideas about what an opera is. Write **WHAT IS OPERA** on the board and list the students' answers. After your students see the performance, ask the same question to see if their answers change.

The word **opera** is the plural form of the Latin word **opus** (which translates quite literally as **work**). Today we use the word **opera** to refer to a theatrically based musical art form in which the drama is sung (without microphones!), rather than spoken, and is accompanied by a full symphony orchestra.

Opera was born out of the belief that drama can be better expressed by music and text than by text alone. One of the unique things about opera is how it combines so many different art forms (music, drama, and visual arts) to create an artistic spectacle. Of course, the use of many art forms means that there are many people involved in the creation and production of an opera. These may include:

Composer: Writes the music

Librettist: Chooses a story, writes or adapts the words

Conductor: Leads the musicians and singers

Director: Blocks or stages the entire production

Principal Singers: Have the leading and supporting roles

Chorus: Sings as a group

Supernumeraries: Act but do not sing

Repetiteur: Accompanies singers during rehearsal, plays the orchestral score on piano

Costume Designer: Designs the costumes for each character

Wardrobe/Costume Staff: Fit, clean, & repair costumes; help singers put on costumes

Wig Staff: Make and fit wigs to the principal singers, chorus, and supernumeraries

Make-up Staff: Apply make-up for principal singers, assist chorus with make-up

Set Designer: Designs the scenery for each scene

Lighting Designer: Designs lighting effects

Prop Builders: Build/buy all the set pieces that are not structural

Stage Manager: "Calls the show" -- cues scenery changes, lighting, and singers so that everything happens at the right time

Stagehands: Move scenery; run lighting & sound cues

Front of House Staff: Work in the performance venue: seating patrons.

Artistic Director: Chooses which shows to produce and which artists to hire

Administrative Staff: Find funding; sell tickets; hire artists; take care of the business side of opera

Audience: Enjoys and appreciates opera from a seat in the hall!

Critic: Writes a critique of performance for newspaper, radio, or TV

Characters and Synopsis

Characters

Mato the Bear, tenor
Mato's Mom, soprano
Eagle and Snake, baritone
Otter, mezzo soprano

Synopsis

Setting: A forest near a Great Lake

Time: the first day of spring

The opera opens on the first day of spring on the shore of a Great Lake, on the edge of a North American forest. All the animals who live by the water are excited by the change of season, and a chorus of birds sings to greet the rising sun. Mato and his mother enter, and she tells him now that he's two years old; it is time for him to roam into the forest himself. They say goodbye to each other and promise to meet in a year.

Mato wanders along the lakeside and sees fish in the water, but because he never listened carefully to his mother, he can't remember how to catch them! He first meets an eagle who tries to teach him to catch fish the way his elders had taught him, but because Mato can't fly – and is afraid of heights – this doesn't help him. Mato then meets an otter and follows his new friend deep into the lake's water to catch fish. But Mato realizes he can't swim well enough, and he quickly heads back to shore, again with no fish!

A snake approaches Mato, and though he says he can teach Mato the way to catch fish, it is clear that the reptile has his own plan...

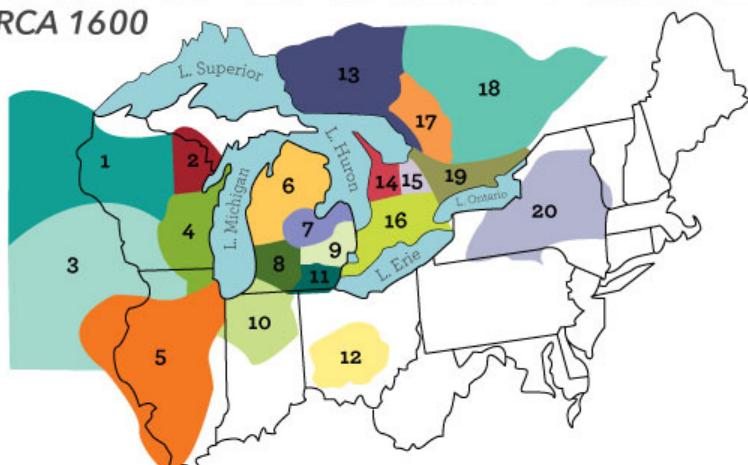
Thunder rolls, it begins to rain, and Mato still doesn't know how to fish. Suddenly, he has a realization: though every animal he met has their own way to fish, maybe he just needs to find his own way. Perhaps in his questions were all the answers he needs? Let's find out...

Fun Fact...

Twenty Native American Tribes lived in the region near the Great Lakes. The Mascouten, Fox, Kickapoo, and Shawnee Tribes lived in the areas where the Toledo Opera takes *Opera on Wheels*. *The Bear Who Couldn't Fish* is a Lakota legend. The Lakota Tribe was member of the Sioux First Nation that migrated east to Minnesota.

GREAT LAKES TRIBES

CIRCA 1600



- 1 Santee Dakota
- 2 Menominee
- 3 Ioway
- 4 Ho-chunk
- 5 Illinois

- 6 Potawatomi
- 7 Sauk
- 8 Mascouten
- 9 Fox
- 10 Miami

- 11 Kickapoo
- 12 Shawnee
- 13 Ojibwe
- 14 Ottawa
- 15 Petun

- 16 Neutral
- 17 Nipissing
- 18 Algonkin
- 19 Huron
- 20 Iroquois

Resident Artists 2025-2026

Brady DelVecchio (Mato the Bear), tenor



Tenor, Brady DelVecchio is known for his versatility on stage and screen. A native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, his career has brought him international acclaim for his portrayals of engaging romantic leads. Mr. DelVecchio attended The Peabody Conservatory of Music at Johns Hopkins University and New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. Since then, he has had the pleasure of portraying Le Prince Charmant (*Cendrillon*), Mercurio (*La Calisto*), Rektor, Komár, and Pasek (*The Cunning Little Vixen*), Don Ottavio (*Don Giovanni*), Tony (*West Side Story*), Nanki Poo (*The Mikado*) and Timothy Harper (*Strike Up the Band*). While performing traditional operatic, musical theater, and recital repertoire, he has had the privilege of premiering staged new works by Melissa Dunphy (*The Gonzales Cantata*) with the American Opera Theater, Richard Allan White (*Hester*) with the Center for Contemporary Opera and Felix Jarrar (*Fall of the House of Usher*). Mr. DelVecchio's upcoming work includes an Untitled Colin Mochrie Film by Nicola Rose, and a recital series at First Presbyterian Church in Royal Oak, Michigan, where he serves as tenor soloist. Mr. DelVecchio is incredibly thankful and excited to return as the tenor resident artist at Toledo Opera for their 2025-2026 season. Last season, he performed the roles of Spoletta (*Tosca*) and the Professor (*South Pacific*) for Toledo Opera.

Sarah Rachel Bacani (Matto's Mom), soprano



Filipino American soprano Sarah Rachel Bacani is currently the soprano Resident Artist at Toledo Opera. Her 2023-2024 season included covering the role of Juliette (*Roméo et Juliette*) at Central City Opera, where she also performed the role in their Family Matinee production as a Bonfils-Stanton Foundation Artists Training Program Apprentice Artist. In 2022, also with Central City Opera, she made her professional debut performing the role of Mariola in Heggie's *Two Remain*. On the Indiana University Opera Theater stage, she performed the roles of Juliette (*Roméo et Juliette*), Donna Elvira (*Don Giovanni*) and Pamina (*Die Zauberflöte*). There, she also performed in scenes as Leïla (*Les Pécheurs de Perles*), Micaëla (*Carmen*), and Fiordiligi (*Cosi fan tutte*). An accomplished competitor, this year, she placed in the Top 12 of the Inaugural Luciano Pavarotti Foundation Opera Naples International Voice Competition and is a semi-finalist in Fort Worth Opera's McCammon Voice Competition. Hailing from Toms River, NJ, Ms. Bacani received her Performer Diploma and Master of Music in voice at Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, where she studied under the tutelage of Jane Dutton. She received her Bachelor of Music in vocal performance from the Manhattan School of Music, where she studied with Cynthia Hoffmann. Ms. Bacani last appeared with Toledo Opera as Liat and a nurse (*South Pacific*).

Rick Hale (Eagle and Snake), baritone



Baritone Rick Hale believes that music is one of the most fundamentally powerful mediums for communicating human emotions and stories. Opera, in his opinion, is the best-equipped method to communicate the human experience. Mr. Hale is elated to join Toledo Opera as a Resident Artist for the 2025/2026 season, where he will make his mainstage debut as El Dancaïro (*Carmen*) and cover Belcore (*The Elixir of Love*). During the 2024/2025 season, Mr. Hale made his company debut with Resonance Works as the Drunkard in Rachel Portman's *The Little Prince*. In the summer of 2024, he made his debut at the Seagle Festival where he performed the role of W. P. Inman in Jennifer Higdon's *Cold Mountain* and covered the title character in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Additionally, Mr. Hale performed with Slippery Rock University as the Unnamed Bass in the university's production of *Too Many Sopranos*. This summer, he was an Apprentice Artist at Sante Fe Opera. During his time at Carnegie Mellon University, Mr. Hale performed the roles of Kaiser Overall in Viktor Ullmann's *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* and Ben Upthegrove in Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Telephone*. Mr. Hale received his BS in mathematical economics from Gettysburg College, and he recently completed his Master of Music in vocal performance from Carnegie Mellon University where he studied under Daniel Teadt.

Danielle Casós (Otter), mezzo soprano



Mezzo-soprano Danielle Casós is a graduate of the University of Michigan where she earned her Master of Music degree in 2023 and Specialist of Music degree in 2025, studying under Professor Freda Herseth. While at the University of Michigan, she performed the roles of Mrs. Grose (*Turn of the Screw*), Elizabeth Cree (*Elizabeth Cree*), Zerlina (*Don Giovanni*), Fox Gold-Stripe (*Cunning Little Vixen*), and Mrs. McClean (*Susannah*). An avid performer of new works, Ms. Casós was involved in UMich's orchestral workshop premiere of Derek Bermel's *The House on Mango Street* as the leading role of Esperanza (2024), and also originated the role of Older Leah in Lori Laitman's chamber opera, *Uncovered* (2022). In 2024, she joined the Sandford Studio Artist training program at Kentucky Opera, where she performed the role of Kate Pinkerton (*Madama Butterfly*). In 2023, Ms. Casós performed as a Studio Artist in Central City Opera's Bonfils-Stanton Training Program, where she performed in a scenes program as Dorabella (*Così fan tutte*) and Zweite Dame (*Die Zauberflöte*). In 2022, she joined the Lehrer Vocal Institute at Music Academy of the West where she covered the role of Olga (*Eugene Onegin*). Ms. Casós is thrilled to be joining Toledo Opera for their 2025-2026 season.

Yura Jang, pianist



Yura Jang is a highly accomplished pianist and opera coach who recently completed her master's degree in collaborative piano at the Mannes School of Music, under the mentorship of Cristina Stanescu. Her musical foundation was established at the University of Seoul in South Korea, where she earned her bachelor's degree in piano performance. Ms. Jang has distinguished herself particularly in the field of opera coaching, having worked on productions such as Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Puccini's *La Bohème*, and Verdi's *Rigoletto*. Additionally, her collaboration as a vocal soloist performing Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* showcases her profound understanding and sensitivity toward vocal performance. Since relocating to the United States, Ms. Jang has captivated audiences with expressive interpretations and technical precision at prestigious venues such as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Steinway Hall, the German Consulate General in New York, and WQXR (New York's classical radio station). Her versatility extends beyond opera to chamber music concerts and various competitions, earning her the grand prize at the UK International Music Competition 2024. Additionally, she was awarded first place at the LAKMA Scholarship Competition in Los Angeles, receiving both a scholarship and an opportunity to perform a piano concerto. Ms. Jang's career is defined by her dedication, resilience, and the artistic insight she brings to both performances and teaching.

Mató is a Lakota Legend

This story is an adaptation of a Lakota tribe legend about how their people learned to fish: Mató was a very small bear when he came into this world. He was born in a cave deep within the earth and was not big enough to harm anybody. His mother called him Mató čhiŋčála (bear cub) in the language of the people.

When his mother awoke from her long sleep, she took Mató čhiŋčála out into the bright sunshine of spring.

“What are these creatures flying high above my head?” asked Mató čhiŋčála.

“Wañblí,” his mother replied in her low, gruff voice. “It is from Eagle that we learn to live our lives in dignity. Eagle’s eyes are keener than our own, so we always listen to warnings he sends from above.”

Mató čhiŋčála’s mother led him across the sweet-smelling meadow to the edge of a river where she would teach him to drink. He put his nose into the cold, clear water and took a taste. The shock of the rushing water made him instantly alert and watchful.



Lakota Tribe

Many years later, when he had grown into his warrior name, Mató would remember his first drink. Whenever he needed clarity of thought or alertness for hunting, he would plunge himself into the river to prepare himself for the task.

Mató remembered his early days with fondness, for his mother was a great teacher. She always protected him and gave him guidance for living the fullness of life. She taught him how to hunt for grubs inside the rotting trunks of fallen fir trees. She taught him which flowers and grasses were sweetest, which roots would make him strong and which berries would fill out his flesh for his first long winter’s sleep. And she taught him how to catch the redfish as they came crashing up against him in the slippery river. Mató’s mother showed him a special place between two craggy rocks where he could lodge himself.

“Wait quietly and with patience in this place,” she said, “and the great red flashing, thrashing things will jump right into your mouth.”

And so it was that the people learned to fish by watching Mató and his mother. From that time forth, Mató and the people never went hungry, as long as he and his brothers could be seen fishing in the river. And the people sang praises and danced for the gift of Mató and his Mother.

Composer and Librettist

Matthew Fossa, Composer



A native of Upstate New York, Matthew Fossa has been a prolific composer for decades. Since attending college in the mid 1990s, he has composed and arranged music for himself and his many musical colleagues and friends. He has written many works including solo instrument pieces, chamber music, full band and orchestra works, as well as opera. His children's opera, *The Bear Who Couldn't Fish*, commissioned by Pensacola Opera and using an original libretto by Joshua Borths, enjoyed a very successful world premiere in the Fall of 2024. Since the premiere, it has been performed many times around the Central Gulf Coast area. Mr. Fossa has also scored various video and short film projects as well as a mobile phone game, *Darkdawn Encounters*. His publishing label, Twin Reeds Productions, enjoys international distribution and his performing and composing skills can be heard together on his hybrid instrumental/electronica albums, *Forward Reflections*, *TechnOboe*, and his recent single, *Journey Up The Nile*.

An oboist, Mr. Fossa has been the Principal Oboist of the Pensacola Symphony Orchestra since 2002. In 2007, he was appointed to the same position with the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra and, additionally, has been in the oboe section of the Mobile Symphony Orchestra since 2004. He has also performed as Guest Principal Oboist of the Richmond (VA) Symphony Orchestra, Principal Oboist of the Panama City Symphony Orchestra, Co-Principal Oboist of the Gulf Coast Symphony Orchestra, and has been a regular member of the oboe sections of the Albany (GA) Symphony and the Orchestra of Northern New York. Mr. Fossa has also performed as a recitalist and had numerous solo appearances with the professional ensembles in the region.

Additionally, his playing can be heard on Pedro Camacho's "My Home is in the Stars" from the soundtrack to the computer game *Star Citizen*.

Mr. Fossa is on the faculties of the University of West Florida, Pensacola State College, and Northwest Florida State College. Mr. Fossa received his Bachelor's Degree in Music Performance and the Performer's Certificate from the Crane School of Music in May of 1998. He was awarded his Master's Degree in Oboe Performance at the Florida State University in December of 2000.

Joshua Borths, Librettist



Joshua Borths is a stage director, writer, educator, and dramaturg. He has directed numerous professional productions, given over five hundred public lectures, and written more than eight children's operas that have introduced hundreds of thousands of young audiences to opera across the country.

Originally from Cincinnati, OH, Borths is currently the Director of Opera Theatre at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, VA and the Company Dramaturg at Des Moines Metro Opera. Borths comes to Virginia after having served as the Resident Scholar at Virginia Opera, Director of Opera & Musical Theater and Professor of Music History at Capital University in Columbus, OH, and as Director of Education at Arizona Opera.

At Virginia Opera, Borths gave popular opera previews and curated numerous educational experiences. At Capital University, Borths produced and managed all of the opera and musical theatre programming while also serving as the Professor of Music History. Additionally, he created a joint Resident Artist Program with Opera Columbus creating innovative programming for both institutions. With Arizona Opera, Borths more than doubled the reach and scope of department through innovative programming and cultural engagement. By the end of his tenure, the Department of Education reached 70,000 people annually.

Known for his thoughtful and imaginative productions, Borths most recently directed "The Flying Dutchman" for Des Moines Metro Opera and *Hansel and Gretel* for Opera Montana. Borths returns to Des Moines Metro Opera in 2026 to direct a new production of Puccini's *Tosca*. Previous production include an "uproariously funny new production" (Arizona Daily Star) of *The Barber of Seville* for Arizona Opera and a "beautiful, even poetic" (Opera Today) new production of *The Falling and the Rising*. Additional upcoming productions include *Three Decembers*, *La Traviata*, and *Dialogues of the Carmelites*.

Musical Terms found in TBWCF

Because many of the most influential composers of opera were Italian, we often use Italian words to describe tempo indications, sections within operas, and dynamic descriptions. Here are definitions of several of the musical terms used in *The Bear Who Couldn't Fish*.

Allegretto an Italian word that means light, graceful, and moderately fast. It's not frantic but is more like a skip than a run. Have your students skip around the room in an allegretto fashion.

Allegro an Italian term that means cheerful or lively and is used to indicate a piece should be performed at a relatively fast pace and in a bright and merry manner. Have your students run around the gymnasium with great spirit and big smiles on their faces!

Allegro vivace an Italian term for even faster than allegro! If it's safe, have your students chase each other around the room in a quick and playful manner!

Andante an Italian word that signifies a flowing walking pace or tempo – not too fast or too slow, but just right! Have your students walk around the classroom with flowing hand gestures to show an andante tempo.

Moderato an Italian word used to describe a moderate or medium tempo, usually stately and majestic. Have your students walk around the room as though they are a king, queen, prince, or princess – head held high and shoulders back!

Overture this word, derived from Latin (apertura – to open) is used to describe an extended instrumental introduction to an opera.

Interlude instrumental “filler” between acts or scenes of an opera.

Finale an Italian term to describe the conclusion of a musical or staged work, usually dramatic and climatic!

Colla voce Italian for “with the voice,” usually found in orchestra or piano parts accompanying singers, especially when the collaborators need to aid the singer through a difficult passage.

Accelerando this Italian term is used to describe a sense of excitement and urgency when the performers gradually increase (accelerate!) the tempo or speed of the piece of music.

Aria one of the most important Italian words used in opera! It simply means “song.” An aria is a self-contained piece of music for solo voice with orchestral or piano accompaniment which conveys the emotions and feelings that the character is experiencing.

Italian words used for dynamic contrasts (loud/soft) within an opera:

Piano (p) soft

Mezzo piano (mp) literally, medium soft

Mezzo forte (mf) medium loud

Forte (f) loud

Fortissimo (ff) Really Loud!!!!

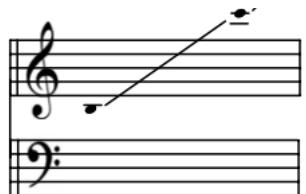
The Operatic Voice

Being an opera singer is hard work! Singers need to be physically strong and have superb technique in order to sustain long phrases (musical thoughts): this means they have excellent control of both the inhalation and exhalation of their breath. Likewise, their voices must maintain a resonance (using the cavities in the face to increase the audibility of the voice, even when singing quietly) in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. All this resonance is necessary to achieve the volume required to be heard above the orchestra that accompanies the singers. Opera singers do not usually use microphones, so they must project their voices throughout a whole theatre using only their muscles and technique! All voices are defined by both the actual voice "type" and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited. The range, pitch, and tone of a singer's voice will determine what kind of role they will play in the opera. Below are a list of the voice types (and ranges) commonly found in operas:

Female Voice Types

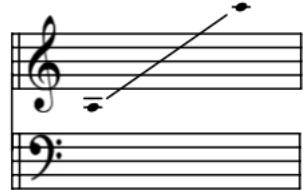
• Soprano ("sopra" = "over")

The highest pitched female voice. Soprano voices vary by sound type: there are coloratura sopranos, who can sing very high notes and rapid passages with ease, dramatic sopranos, whose voices have great power, and lyric sopranos, whose voices have exceptional beauty and can sustain long passages. Composers often (but not always) write the female lead role in an opera for a soprano.



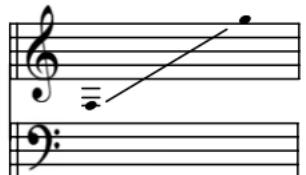
• Mezzo-Soprano ("mezzo" = "medium")

Lower than the soprano and higher than contralto. Usually plays either the character of a young boy (this is called a trouser role) or a complex character with energy and awareness of life, or an evil character. Bizet's Carmen is one of the most famous mezzo roles in opera and is a rare lead role for a mezzo.



• Contralto ("contra" = "against" & "alto" = "high")

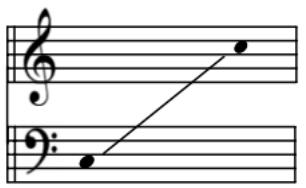
The lowest pitched female voice, these singers have a deep, well rounded sound. Contraltos are more rare than sopranos or mezzos, and they are usually given the role of a maid, mother, or grandmother. Olga in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* is one such role.



Male Voice Types

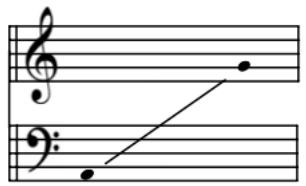
• Tenor ("tenere" = "to hold" - central notes of harmony)

The highest sounding male voice: often the leading role. Tenors, like sopranos, can have lyric or dramatic sound quality. Luciano Pavarotti was one of the world's most famous lyric tenors. Tenors typically play characters that fall in love with sopranos, such as Alfredo in Verdi's *La Traviata*.



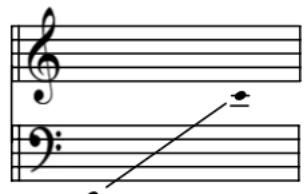
• Baritone (from the Greek term for "deep sounding")

These voices are more mellow-sounding and slightly lower than tenors. The roles sung by baritones are usually father figures or counts and other nobles, and these are often important roles in the story (like Rigoletto in Verdi's *Rigoletto*).



• Bass ("low")

Basses are the lowest sounding human voices, and they often play roles of wise and older characters in opera, like kings, emperors, or gods. They can also play profoundly evil characters, like Satan in Mephistopheles or Faust. The basso profundo is the lowest voice in singing, and is commonly heard in Russian opera. One of the most recognizable bass roles in opera is Leporello in W.A. Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.



Class Activities (Pre-performance)

Prior to viewing *The Bear Who Couldn't Fish*, share the following information and/or activities with your students to help them engage with the characters, plot, and themes.

Great Lakes Animals: Their Habits and Habitats: (Biology, Natural Science)

Black Bears

The American black bear is an adaptable animal that thrives across the Great Lakes region, including parts of Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Ontario. Here is some interesting info about their habitats and behaviors:



Habitat:

- Forested Areas: Black bears favor dense forests with leafy trees, pine trees, and thick, ground vegetation, which offer cover and food sources.
- Wetlands & Mast-Producing (nut and fruit) Trees: Spring diets rely heavily on wetland vegetation, while summer and fall diets depend on berries, nuts, and acorns from trees.
- Remote Terrain: They prefer rugged, mountainous areas or secluded forests to avoid humans.
- Denning Sites: During winter hibernation, they find shelter in old trees, caves, or under logs and rocks.



Black Bear



Behaviors:

- Omnivore (eat both plants and meat) Diet: Their diet includes berries, nuts, insects, fish, small mammals, and plants. This variety helps them adapt to changes in the seasons.
- Solitary Lifestyle: Black bears mostly live and roam alone, except when mothers are raising cubs.
- Daily Activity: Most hunt and forage during the daytime (diurnal) in forests and wetlands but may do so at night (nocturnal) near human settlements to avoid contact.

Eagles

Here are some cool facts about bald eagles, the most prominent eagle species in the Great Lakes area:



Habitat:

- Bald eagles live near lakes, rivers, and wetlands—perfect places to find fish!
- They build huge nests called eyries or aeries in tall trees or cliffs near water.
- These nests can be as wide as a car and are reused and added to every year.



Bald Eagle



Diet & Hunting:

- Bald eagles are carnivores, which means they eat meat.
- Their favorite food is fish, but they also eat small animals like rabbits or ducks.
- They have super eyesight—they can spot a fish from way up in the sky!

Otters

Playful, furry animals, otters that love water! In the Great Lakes region, the most common type is the North American river otter. Let's explore their habits and habitats:



Habitat:

- River otters live near rivers, lakes, and wetlands—especially places with clean water and lots of fish.
- They make homes called dens or holts in riverbanks, under tree roots, or in old beaver lodges.
- Otters like areas with lots of plants and hiding spots to stay safe from predators.



River Otter

Continued on page 10

Class Activities (Pre-performance)



Daily Habits:

- Otters are excellent swimmers with webbed feet and long tails to help them move fast in water.
- They love to slide down muddy banks—it's like their own water park!
- Otters are mostly active at night (nocturnal), but sometimes they play during the day, too.



Diet:

- Otters are carnivores—they eat fish, frogs, crayfish, and even small birds or mammals.
- They use their sharp teeth and clever paws to catch and eat their food.
- Otters adults eat a lot—up to 25% of their body weight every day!

Snakes

Here are some fun facts about some species of snakes that live around the Great Lakes.



Habitats:

Snakes in the Great Lakes region live in a variety of places:

- Wetlands and marshes: Great for water-loving snakes like the northern watersnake.
- Forests and grassy areas: Home to snakes like the eastern garter snake and northern ribbon snake.
- Rocky shores and sandy beaches: Especially around Lake Erie, where the Lake Erie watersnake thrives.



Lake Erie Watersnake



Daily Habits:

Snakes have cool behaviors that help them survive:

- Hiding: Many snakes hide under logs, rocks, or in tall grass to stay safe.
- Shedding: Snakes shed their skin as they grow—like taking off an old jacket!
- Hibernating: In winter, snakes sleep in underground burrows to stay warm.



Diet:

- Snakes eat frogs, fish, worms, insects, and even small rodents.

Meet Some Great Lakes Snakes

Snake Name:

Eastern Garter Snake

Northern Watersnake

Lake Erie Watersnake

Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake

Kirtland's Snake

Northern Ribbon Snake

Fun Fact:

Has stripes and releases a stinky smell when scared

Loves swimming and looks like a venomous snake—but isn't

Was once endangered, now thriving thanks to conservation

Only venomous snake in Michigan—very shy, rattles to warn

Small and harmless, loves wet grassy areas

Fast and skittish, eats frogs and fish

Class Activities (Pre-performance)

Activity #1 (Science, Environment)

The Bear Who Couldn't Fish: Great Lakes Animals and their Habits and Habitats

Name:_____

Date:_____

Answer the following questions based on the facts you learned about the habits and habitats of the Great Lakes' animals who are also characters in the opera, *The Bear Who Couldn't Fish*:

A. Omnivore or Carnivore: Omnivores are animals who eat both plants and meat. Carnivores are animals who eat only meat.

In the blank next to the animal, write an O if the animal is an omnivore or a C if the animal is a carnivore.

1. Bear:_____
2. Eagle:_____
3. Otter:_____
4. Snake:_____

Bonus: Name another animal that is an omnivore:_____

Bonus: Name another animal that is a carnivore:_____

B. Where is my habitat?: Animals have particular habitats where they live so they grow and thrive. After the description of the habitat, write the name of the animal who lives there.

Some habitats may have more than one answer.

Bear

Eagle

Otter

Snake

1. A den:_____
2. Rocky shores or sandy beaches:_____
3. A large nest:_____
4. Rugged mountain terrain:_____
5. Near lakes and wetlands:_____

Bonus: Describe your habitat. Does it have any similarities to habitats of the bear, eagle, otter or snake?

Class Activities (Pre-performance)

Prior to viewing *The Bear Who Couldn't Fish*, share the following information and/or activities with your students to help them engage with the characters, plot, and themes.

Spring Animal Behaviors: (Biology, Natural Science)

The setting of *The Bear Who Couldn't Fish* is in the spring near a forest in our region of the Great Lakes. Here are some of the unique behaviors that the animal characters exhibit in real life in the spring.

Black Bears

Spring is an exciting time for young black bears, especially in places like Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. After spending the winter snuggled in a den with their mom (called a sow), bear cubs finally get to explore the world!

What Do Bear Cubs Do in Spring?

- Wake Up from Hibernation-- Cubs are born in the den during winter. By spring, they're big enough to leave the den and start learning how to survive.
- Follow Their Mom-- Mama bear teaches her cubs how to find food, climb trees, and stay safe. Cubs stick close to her and copy everything she does.
- Learn to Climb-- Cubs are natural climbers! They use their sharp claws to climb trees to escape danger, play, or nap in the branches.
- Sniff Out Food-- Bears have amazing noses! Cubs learn to sniff out berries, bugs, roots, and even fish.
- Splash and Play-- Cubs love water! They might swim in lakes or streams to cool off, chase frogs, or just splash around for fun.
- Practice Digging-- Cubs use their claws to dig for insects or tasty roots. It's messy work, but they're good at it!



Black Bear Cub

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Interesting Facts About Black Bears

- **They are not necessarily black-- some black bears are a light brown color.**
- **They are shy and timid-- they will climb a tree or hide before confronting a human, but never, ever try to touch one!**
- **They can eat over 10,000 berries in one day!**
- **They are incredibly strong animals--they are 5x stronger than a human being!**
- **They have nimble paws--black bears can open doors and unscrew lids.**
- **They are playful cubs--they will often wrestle with their siblings and mother which helps them learn how to live in the wild.**
- **They are highly intelligent-- they can memorize their whole territory; they also make tools (scratching sticks) out of twigs.**

Class Activities (Pre-performance)

Eagles

Spring is a fine time to be a bald eagle in the Great Lakes region!

What Do Eagles Do in Spring?

- Nest Building: Eagles build huge nests called aeries high up in trees or cliffs. Some nests can be as big as a small car!
- Egg Laying: Around March, eagle moms lay 1-3 eggs. Both parents take turns keeping the eggs warm.
- Chick Raising: Baby eagles, called eaglets, hatch after about 35 days. They start off fluffy and gray, and grow really fast!



Bald Eagle Nest

What Do Eagles Eat?

- Fish Feast: Eagles love fish! They swoop down and grab them with their strong talons.

Otters

Let's dive into the springtime habits of otters in the Great Lakes!

What Do Otters Do in Spring:

- Spring is baby season! Otter moms give birth to pups in cozy dens.
- Pups are born with their eyes closed and learn to swim at around 2 months old.
- Otters become more active in spring as the ice melts and food becomes easier to find.



Baby River Otters

Playful Personalites

- Otters are known for being super playful.
- They slide down muddy banks, chase each other, and even play with rocks.
- Playing helps young otters learn important skills like swimming and hunting.

Snakes

Let's slither into some cool facts about what snakes do when the weather warms up around the Great Lakes.

What Do Snakes Do in Spring?

- Snakes spend the cold winter in a deep sleep called brumation (kind of like hibernation for reptiles).
- When spring arrives, they wake up and come out of their hiding spots to warm up in the sun.



Baby Snake

What Do Snakes Eat?

- After sleeping all winter, snakes are hungry! They start hunting for food like:
 - Earthworms, frogs and toads, small fish, and insects

Where Will You See Them?

- Near lakes, ponds, and wetlands
- In grassy fields or forests
- Under logs or rocks where it's warm and safe

Class Activities (Pre-performance)

Activity #2 (Science, Language Arts)

Imagine yourself as a bear cub, eagle, otter, or snake. Write a narrative about what you would do on your first spring day after a long winter. Be sure to describe the setting (time and place) in your story. Use strong verbs (action words) to show what you would do on this first spring day.

Activity #3 (Language Arts - Speaking, Writing, Parts of Speech)

There are actions that we do every day or almost every day that seem very natural and automatic, but at some time in our lives we didn't know how to do them at all. Make a list of everyday actions you had to learn and how old you were when you learned how to do them.

Examples: Brush your teeth—1 year old?

Ride a tricycle or bicycle—3-7 years old?

Walk—1 year old?

Read—4-7 years old?

Write a short narrative about the action or skill you learned to do. Was it easy or hard? Who helped you? Are you still learning and/improving? Use action verbs and strong adjectives to tell your story.

Activity #4 (Language Arts - Speaking and Writing)

Discuss with the class about a person who helped you learn an important skill or lesson. What did they teach you? How is the lesson or skill important in your life?

Write or create a thank you note to a person in your life who taught you an important lesson or skill. Explain to this person why the lesson/skill was so important to you and what you learned.

Activity #5 (Art - Colors as Emotion)

Has there ever been a time when you've had to say good-bye? To whom? What emotions did you have?

Create a drawing or watercolor (either realistic or abstract) that expresses your emotions associated with saying "good-bye."

Class Activities (Post-performance)

Language Arts (Plot, Character Development, Speaking & Writing)

Plot Discussion Questions (may be discussed aloud or used as a writing assignment)

1. What is the lesson(s) that each of the animal characters teaches Mato? What lesson is most meaningful to you? Explain.

- Eagle—"First you must fall down before you can fly back up."
- Otter—"Life's always better when you make it a game."
- Snake—"Be patient. Be quiet. Calm your mind...Learn self-control."

2. What does Mato discover about himself as he tries to apply each of the animal's advice as he learns to fish? What advice would you have given Mato?

- Eagle—he is afraid of heights.
- Otter—he is afraid of deep water.
- Snake—he is too trusting.

3. Which character is best suited to teach Mato how to fish? Why?

Answer: His mother

Why: She is a bear, like Mato. She is his mother who loves him and wants him to succeed.

Science (Biology)

Activity: Mato is two years old when he is told by his mother that it is now time for him to live on his own. Do you think you could have lived on your own when you were two? In pairs or groups of 3, choose one of these animals on the list below to research.

- Fruit fly
- Monarch Butterfly
- Box Turtle
- Tortoise
- Eastern Garter Snake (or one of the Great Lakes snakes)
- Otter
- Eagle
- Black bear
- Dog
- Cat
- Sturgeon (Great Lakes fish)
- Dolphin
- Blue Whale
- Greenland Shark
- Human

Explore the following questions in your research:

- When does the animal reach adulthood?
- What is the life expectancy of the animal?
- Where is the animal's habitat? Describe.
- What behaviors does the young animal have? As an adult?
- What are 5 interesting facts about the animal?

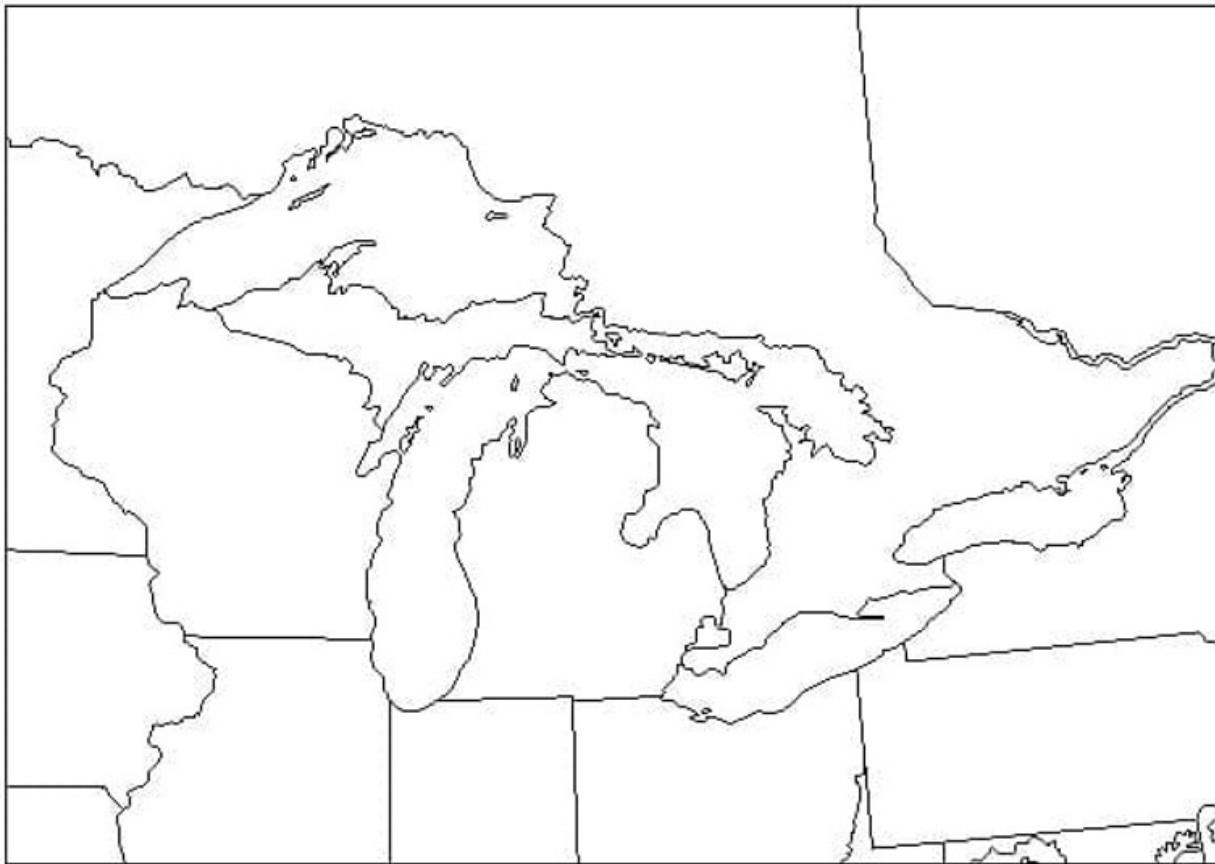
Display your discoveries on a posterboard; be sure to include colorful pictures and/or drawings; and share them with the class.

Enrichment

Here are some activities to help you venture further into the world of *The Bear Who Couldn't Fish*. Our Great Lakes region is a unique environment that is home to 20% of the world's fresh water. The Great Lakes ecosystem provides an appreciation of nature, spaces for recreation and wellness, as well as economic opportunities for the region. Explore Mato's and our home through these projects.

1. Great Lakes Map (Geography, Social Studies)

THE GREAT LAKES



- Label each of the Great Lakes—Lake Erie, Lake Ontario, Lake Michigan, Lake Superior, Lake Huron.
- Color the State of Ohio red.
- Color the State of Michigan blue.
- Mark your hometown with a star on the map and label .

Enrichment

2. One Lake at a Time (Geography, Social Studies, Ohio History, Michigan History)

For this project, work with a partner (or two) to create a large map of one of the Great Lakes. Include the following information on the map:

- Name of the lake you've chosen
- Label at least three cities or towns that border or are near the lake
- Label the location and name of at least one lighthouse

Also, research and include:

- Size of the lake in square miles
- Depth of the lake
- A famous shipwreck
- Three surprising facts or stories about the lake

3. Health of the Great Lakes (Environmental Science)-- What's Hurting the Lakes?

Let's think of the lakes like a big fish tank. If we don't take care of it, things can go wrong:

- Pollution: Trash, oil, and chemicals from cities and farms can end up in the water.
- Invasive Species: Animals like zebra mussels sneak in and cause trouble for native fish and plants.
- Climate Change: Warmer temperatures can change water levels and make it easier for algae to grow.
- Plastic Waste: Tiny pieces of plastic (microplastics) are floating in the lakes and can harm fish and birds.

Project for the Class: **DIY Watershed Model**

- Use a baking tray, sand, and water to simulate how pollution travels through a watershed.
- Add food coloring or glitter to represent pollutants.
- Discuss how this relates to the Great Lakes basin.

For more information, go to <https://www.michiganseagrant.org/lessons/lessons/by-broad-concept/earth-science/exploring-watersheds/>

Enrichment

4. Commerce of the Great Lakes (Social Studies, Environmental Studies, Science)

The Great Lakes—Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, and Ontario—are just giant puddles on a map. They’re like watery highways that help move goods, connect cities, and support jobs.

How Do They Help with Commerce?

- Shipping Routes: Boats carry things like iron ore, coal, grain, and cars between cities and countries
- Ports and Cities: Places like Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland have busy ports where goods are loaded and unloaded
- Jobs: People work on ships, in factories, and at ports to keep trade moving

What Gets Shipped?

- Natural Resources: Iron, coal, salt, and limestone
- Food: Corn, wheat, and soybeans from farms
- Products: Cars, steel, and even juice boxes!

Commerce and Nature

- Commerce is important, but we also have to protect the lakes from pollution and invasive species
- Programs like beach cleanups and water testing help keep the lakes healthy
- Activity: **Cargo Boat Challenge**
- Objective: Design and build a boat that can carry the most cargo (coins, blocks, etc.)
- Materials: Aluminum foil, tape, straws, small weights
- Learning: Teaches engineering, buoyancy, and shipping logistics

For more information go to <https://schoolship.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Why-Do-Boats-Float.pdf>

5. Additional Reading (Language Arts, Reading Skills)

If your students loved The Bear Who Couldn’t Fish, here are some books they might enjoy written by indigenous/Native American authors about their own customs, legends, and experiences (www.bookriot.com):

Still This Love Goes On by Buffy Sainte-Marie, Illustrated by Julie Flett

Indigenous Cree musician Buffy Sainte-Marie’s lyrics to the song of the same name are

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Enrichment

beautifully illustrated by Cree-Métis illustrator Julie Flett in this new picture book. Both the lyrical prose and the warm, seasonal illustrations celebrate Indigenous traditions of honoring nature and community. This is a perfect author/illustrator team-up, and the backmatter includes sheet music to the song as well as notes from Sainte-Marie and Flett describing their inspirations for the lyrics and illustrations.

Keepunumuk: Weeâchumun's Thanksgiving Story by Danielle Greendeer, Anthony Perry, and Alexis Bunten, Illustrated by Gary Meeches, Sr.

This is a must-read picture book about Thanksgiving from a Native American perspective. A Mashpee Wampanoag grandmother tells her two grandchildren about how their ancestors aided the Pilgrims by honoring and harvesting the three sisters-- corn, bean, and squash. During a three-day celebratory meal to welcome the newcomers, the Wampanoags taught the Pilgrims how to harvest and care for the three sisters. This picture book includes a pronunciation guide and more details about the Wampanoag's beliefs in ancestor spirits.

Berry Song by Michaela Goade

Tlingit and Haida author/illustrator Michaela Goade won the 2021 Caldecott Medal for her illustrations in *We Are Water Protectors*, and her illustrations in *Berry Song* are just as gorgeous. This latest picture book joyfully honors the special relationship between a grandmother and grandchild, the changing seasons, and the richness of the land by providing food. Grandmother and granddaughter sing to the land in gratitude as they collect berries, fish, and herring eggs, and the land sings back. The sing-song lyrics make this a great read aloud.

Tanna's Lemming by Rachel Qitsualik-Tinsley and Sean Qitsualik-Tinsley, Illustrated by Tamara Campeau

This sweet picture book tells a nuanced story about what it means to care for nature. Tanna is collecting lemmings for a researcher to study when she finds a tiny one under a rock. Instead of giving the lemming to the researcher, she keeps this one as a pet. Tanna knows that she understands how to treat the lemming far better than any outsider researcher could. She calls the lemming Fluffi, and at first, Fluffi fits in perfectly in Tanna's home. But when Fluffi eats her mother's fabric, Tanna begins to realize a more complicated truth — that sometimes to truly care for a living thing means setting it free.

6. Coloring Pages (Art, Fine Motor Skills)

We're excited to share these coloring pages inspired by *The Bear Who Couldn't Fish!* After watching the performance, have students color these pages to bring the characters and scenes to life with their own artistic flair. Once they've finished coloring, proudly display the artwork in the classroom to share your students' creativity with everyone. Let's see how each student imagines the world of the Mato—no two pages will look the same!







