

Salamander Story

The combination of melting snow, rising temperature and rain last weekend triggered the annual salamander migration. Our relatives from New York City were visiting for the weekend, so we took a ride over to Moose Hill Audubon Wildlife Sanctuary in the drizzle on Saturday night to witness the phenomenon.

Arriving at Moose Hill we encountered barricades manned by volunteers who told us the road was temporarily blocked to traffic to spare the migrating amphibians from getting squashed by car tires. We parked, grabbed our umbrellas and flashlights, and headed down the blocked road.

As we walked, we scanned the pavement for signs of life, but at first we saw nothing. Then we saw flashlights ahead. Another party was crowded around a pool of light on the road, in the center of which sat a wood frog. They informed us that there were also many tiny tree frogs called spring peepers hopping around, and advised us to walk slowly and try not to step on them. Sweeping their flashlight beams, they quickly located a tiny tree frog about the size of my fingernail, and then a couple more. We suddenly realized that we had to be more careful to avoid stepping on the creatures we had come to see.



The others also informed us that the odd quacking sounds emanating from the woods were the mating calls of wood frogs, while the cricket-like chirping sounds were tree frogs.



Proceeding on, we rounded a curve in the road and encountered a fat black mole salamander with bright yellow spots. It was purposefully crossing the road separating its subterranean home in the woods from the vernal pool where it joins hundreds of others every spring to spawn.

Cold, clear vernal pools last just a few months before drying up in summer, just long enough to allow the salamander tadpoles to emerge as air-breathing salamanders, but not long enough to support a population of fish that would otherwise eat the tadpoles. The vernal pools provide the tadpoles with a rich diet of fairy shrimp, mosquito larvae, and other tiny prey.

We met another, larger group of flashlight-toting walkers guided by Patty Shaver of the Moose Hill Sanctuary. Patty told us to tread carefully because there were numerous red efts crossing along with the yellow-spotted salamanders. It was not long before we found one and then another of these earth-

worm-sized red salamanders trekking across the pavement toward the vernal pool.

Having witnessed four species of amphibians in less than an hour, we headed home. As we returned, the drizzle increased to light rain, and we encountered more salamanders crossing the road than we had on the way out.



Experiencing the instinctive spawning migration of these secretive amphibians provided us with a memorable reminder of the miracle of nature that surrounds and sustains us. As vernal pools and woodland habitat are increasingly compromised by development, acid rain, mercury, global warming and other factors related to human activities, we can only wonder if our descendants will be similarly privileged.