

It's Spring, Let's Party!

Yes, I know, there's still snow on the ground but Spring is rounding the bend and warmer temperatures and brighter days are coming. Nature in our neighborhood is waking up and, as the comedian Robin Williams said, "Spring is nature's way of saying, 'Let's party!'"

Heralding in the celebration is the chorus of early morning bird song you'll start to hear. The cardinals, chickadees, robins, and red winged blackbirds are again singing at the start of their breeding season. Let the revelry begin!

There's also a big Springtime bash happening in the neighborhood ponds and vernal pools, where you'll hear the distinctive plucked banjo string call of green frogs, the unmistakable bellowing of bullfrogs, and the loud jingle bell unison chirping of the Spring peepers. (Appropriately, a group of peepers is termed a "chorus").

Though not as vocal, there are other amphibious creatures that emerge with the warm Spring rains to journey to breed in vernal pools. Several species, such as the Spotted and Jefferson Salamanders, are migrating from their overwintering spots in wooded upland areas to lay their eggs in vernal pools.

To see a list of the frogs and salamanders - as well as all the other flora and fauna - that has been observed in Swampscott (or to add your own sightings to the list) go to: inaturalist.org/places/swampscott-ma-us.

The vernal pool festivities only occur in Spring (hence the name "vernal"), and only for a short time. That's because these shallow depressions, which are filled with late winter and early spring snowmelt and rain runoff, typically dry out by summer.

Nevertheless, they are essential breeding habitats for many amphibians who have adapted to the unique seasonal nature of the vernal pools. What brings these species there to lay their eggs is not so much what the vernal pool has, but what it doesn't have - fish. Because vernal pools often dry out in Summer, they lack suitable habitat for fish. Absent fish, there's less predation of the eggs and the newly hatched salamanders and frogs.

A variety of invertebrates also depend on vernal pools, among which are the wonderfully named Caddisflies, Dragon Nymphs, Water Striders, and Fairy Shrimp. The latter are so called because their delicate translucent bodies and habit of gracefully swimming upside down creates an illusion of floating fairies. These invertebrates are critical for the ecosystem's health and biodiversity as they serve as both predators and prey in the vernal pool food chain.

Threats to Vernal Pools

Unfortunately, vernal pools are under threat, primarily from human development. They've been plowed in, paved over, and built upon. Pollution from runoff and the spread of invasive species are also a threat, as are the warmer temperatures brought by climate change. The destruction of these valuable ecosystems results in loss of the unique species that depend on the pools for their survival. This, in turn, also affects other wildlife, as larger animals rely on these amphibians and their eggs as a food source.

State laws offer some protection. For instance, although vernal pools themselves are not protected under the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act, if they lie within a resource that is protected under the Act (such as bordering vegetated wetlands or land subject to flooding), then they are protected as important wildlife habitat.

Certified vernal pools are afforded a higher level of protection than those that are undocumented. If certified, both developers and local conservation commissioners will know a vernal pool is on a proposed building site. A list of certified pools can be found on the map at www.mass.gov/info-details/massgis-data-nhosp-certified-vernal-pools. (Note the number of pools in Lynn and Swampscott!)

Anyone can help certify vernal pools by gathering information and submitting it to MassWildlife's Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program. For more information on certification and how volunteers can help certify vernal pools: mass.gov/eea/agencies/dfg/dfw/natural-heritage/vernal-pools

Local laws can also provide extra security for vernal pools. For example, a by-law or ordinance could increase the area of the vernal pool's protected

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buffer zone from where the amphibians migrate or provide protection of smaller pools that don't qualify for state registration. Some local communities have such laws, such as the cities of Lynn and Salem.

Learn More!

Come to a presentation on vernal pools by the Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team on **Monday April 13 at 6:30 pm** at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Swampscott. Hosted by the Swampscott Conservancy and the Church, it will feature a 15-minute video and accompanying talk on vernal pool ecology as well as a chance to see a few LIVE frogs, salamanders, and other critters. Afterwards, people are invited to venture outdoors for a rain or shine guided exploration of a certified vernal pool in the woods by the Church. This family-friendly event is an excellent opportunity to learn about vernal pools and the wildlife that depend on them. The event is free and open to the public. So that you can be contacted in case of postponement or cancellation, people are encouraged to register at:
<https://tinyurl.com/3bn9csds>

Spring is a time of awakening and activity! Come celebrate as nature in our neighborhood stirs back to life after a long winter's rest. Let's Party!