

the OAK LEAF

a publication of the white oak land conservation society

Spring/Summer 2006

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

In this spring 2006 edition of The Oakleaf, we take a closer look at some of the other creatures who share our living space here in New England. By the time this newsletter reaches you, spring peepers will be singing, and the **vernal pool season** will be starting up again. One of our newer board members, Paul McManus, describes his experiences with vernal pools in our cover article. A new column, "What's Out There", will be a regular feature in which our "reporters" share what they've seen recently in and around Holden.

Other articles this month focus on how we can share our excitement about wildlife and wilderness with the next generation. We're excited that so many teachers are learning about **environmental education** this year, and that the kids they teach are having such a good time **outdoors**. Most of our kids don't spend nearly as much time outdoors as we did when we were young – when we encourage outdoor activities, we help to ensure that the next generation will learn to love our forests, rivers and wildlife. People will protect only what they care about, and they will care about only what they know.

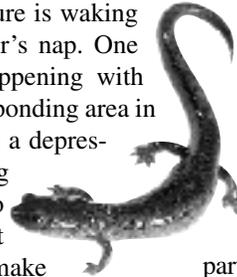
Over the next few months White Oak members will be outside certifying vernal pools, exploring forests and trails, and taking care of properties. If you and your family would like to see a vernal pool up close, or visit a beaver worksite within one mile of Town Hall, or just help look after our lands, please send us an email at info@whiteoaktrust.org. We love to show off what nature has to offer!

Vernal Pools — Get Your Feet Wet!

By Paul McManus

Spring is here, and nature is waking up from a long winter's nap. One place to find this happening with particular vigor is that little ponding area in the woods out back. If such a depression generally holds standing water for a few months into the spring and summer, but not all year (which would make it habitable for fish) a special type of habitat is found: a vernal pool. Vernal pools are areas of ephemeral ponding, where high seasonal groundwater and spring runoff collect in depressions in the landscape. This annual ponding, combined with a lack of fish guaranteed by summertime drying, makes vernal pools ideal habitat for a number of animal species.

Sometimes, the animals of a vernal pool can be heard more than seen. The early evening "peep-peep-peep" of little spring peepers and the raucous "quacking" of a chorus of male wood frogs serenading for mates can often lead the observant listener to a fleeting aquatic treasure. Vernal pools provide essential mating and breeding habitat for a number of species that spend much of their life cycles in the adjacent dry woodlands. The most colorful of the common species is probably the spotted salamander. One of several species of "mole salamanders," the "spotted" spend most of the year in the upland forest, shyly inhabiting underground spaces such as the burrows of moles, shrews, or other small mammals, or making use of crevices in rocks. When springtime arrives, these normally terrestrial amphibians move down slope to a vernal pool, often to the same pool where they were reared. When the transition from winter to spring is abrupt and consists of a warm rainy night that frees the ground of snow and fills the pools, there can be a mass migration of sala-



manders and frogs that vernal pool aficionados know as "Big Night." On Big Night, amphibians by the hundreds can move to a single small pool, sometimes traveling many hundreds of feet.

Attention to the weather sometime around late March, a raincoat, and a flashlight are all that is required to take part in this extraordinary hop- and crawl-fest. It's worth the trip! For the truly adventurous and kind-hearted, Mass Audubon and other organizations organize Big Night critter crossing patrols, to help migrating amphibians across busy roadways.

After Big Night breeding, intrepid wet-footed naturalists (hip waders are really best!) should search for the egg masses left behind by females that heeded the male frogs' mating call or the dancing enticement of the male salamanders. Careful examination of translucent, gelatinous blobs attached to shrubs, grasses or any other convenient holdfast just below the water surface will reveal dozens to hundreds of individual eggs within a protective and nutritious egg mass. The texture and shape of the egg mass will provide clues to the identity of the amphibian parent. But please don't break them from their attachment point, lest an egg mass fall to the darker, colder waters below. Wood frog egg masses lack a strong structure and disintegrate easily if picked up (so please don't), and often take on the green tint of symbiotic algae; relatively firm egg masses are probably those of a spotted salamander. A spaghetti-like string of eggs is likely to become a squiggly collection of spring peeper tadpoles. When searching for egg masses, think like a frog who wants to find the warmest spot for her little babies, which is likely to be in the sunny shallows at the north end of the pool. Wood frog egg

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What's Out There?

We frequently get reports about exciting sightings of wildlife in and around Holden. Here's what's come in over the past month:

- Holden neighbor and former Massachusetts state ornithologist, Brad Blodget, has reported these mid-March arrivals. "It's a very early spring this year," he comments.



Raven

"In fact winter never really arrived..." Flying solo above **Lovell Rd.**, a **common raven** (*corvus corax*). 50% larger than the crow, a raven measures 21-27" from tip of bill to tip of tail. This big bird is found among lonely, rocky places in northern New England and Canada, usually avoiding human settlements. But here he (she?) was in Central Massachusetts announcing his presence with a deep guttural croaking, like a hollow "wonk-wonk."

- On that broad expanse of marsh and open water known as **Chaffins Pond**, Brad found more than 175 **ring necked duck** (*Aythya collaris*), 8 **common goldeneyes**



Ring Necked Duck

(*Bucephala clangula*), two **great blue herons** (*Ardia herodias*), and one **piebilled grebe** (*Podilymbus podiceps*). On Worcester Tech Pond (behind the Red Barn, he spotted 200 **mallards** (*Anas platyrhynchos*), 6 **wood ducks** (*Aix sponsa*) and 10 **black ducks** (*Anas rubripes*).



Common Goldeneyes



Great Blue Heron

- A **mink** (*Mustela vison*) was seen swimming in a stream near **Whitney Street**. It seemed to enjoy zooming through the culvert under the road and into the "rapids" approaching Quinapoxet Reservoir.



Mink

- A **porcupine** (*Erethizon dorsatum*) was observed feeding in a hemlock tree in the **Town Forest** off Harris Street. The



Porcupine

area under the tree was littered with pieces of hemlock branches broken off during feeding, as well as an impressive amount of porcupine scat.

- A large **otter** (*Lontra canadensis*) was seen eating fish on the ice on the pond behind the Red Barn.



Otter

- Heard but not seen: **pileated woodpecker** (*Dryocopus pileatus*) on **Princeton Street**.

- Not seen at all: a group of **beavers**, (*Castor canadensis*) working at night, have just felled several large trees on the Providence & Worcester **railroad, north of Princeton Street**. They've been eating the bark and have taken all the smaller trees away, presumably to their lodge nearby. A competing group has taken down even more trees in a small pond off High Street.



Pileated Woodpecker

Vernal Pools — Get Your Feet Wet! *Continued from front page*

masses are often clustered in such areas. If you see one egg mass, look around, there are often dozens more close by.

While the amphibians are the most notable vernal pool critters, undoubtedly due to their cute (in a slimy sort of way) visage, a long-handled dipnet with a small mesh (1/16 inch or less is best) can reveal a variety of other interesting fauna. Fairy shrimp are delicate little creatures that swim amid the tannin-black pool waters of some vernal pools and survive the annual pool desiccation by laying encysted eggs which must dry and then be re-submerged before they hatch the following winter. If cocktail sauce comes to mind, be prepared to go home hungry, as a hundred of these delicate one-inch long crustaceans still

falls well short of a snack. Dragging one's net along the oak leaves at the bottom of the pool can provide a wide variety of wee critters, mostly of the insect variety: dragonfly and damselfly nymphs, predaceous diving beetle larvae, water boatmen, and my favorite, the caddisflies. These industrious larvae develop from eggs laid by wing-borne adults in vernal pools and other water bodies and waterways. The aquatic larvae are caterpillar-like, but build protective tubular cases by recycling bits of twig, grass, leaves, sand, snail shells, or other materials collected from the floor of the pool. The type of tube construction can even be used to help identify the family of caddisfly. Although most vernal pool invertebrates are insects, small freshwa-

ter clams and snails are often encountered. Shells of these mollusks, as well as empty caddisfly cases, can be found in dry vernal pools in summer and autumn.

If you'd really like to learn more, join White Oak members this spring as they head out into the woods to certify pools all over town. (The state certification process helps to protect the pools from development). If you'd like to help, or just tag along to take a look, email us at info@whiteoak-trust.org. We have a backlog of at least ten pools to get us started!

To learn more about caddisflies and other aspects of vernal pools from the comfort of home, check out the website of the Vernal Pool Association at: www.vernalpool.org.



TRACKING THE WILD PORCUPINE

On a bright, cold Sunday morning last March, a small group of intrepid souls met at the Town Forest on Harris Street for a hike with professional wildlife tracker Paul Wanta of Warwick, MA. Paul runs a wilderness education program for adolescents and leads tracking walks all over Massachusetts. A typical winter walk reveals countless animal tracks recorded in snow. We all wondered what we'd be able to see that day, as snow was only present in a few shadowy patches in the woods. Paul taught us to recognize otter prints, which were present in many of the snow patches, as well as squirrel and coyote tracks. We followed a noisy brook upstream, past ice-bound waterfalls, into an enormous grove of hemlock trees. One of them had hundreds of small green branches strewn on the ground under it. Paul recognized this as a "porcupine tree", looked up, and found a large porcupine feeding on a branch about 20 feet above us! She or he seemed unperturbed as we watched for several minutes. None of the attendees had ever seen a live porcupine before, and all agreed that the experience was an unexpected delight. We'll be inviting Paul back next winter. To find out his schedule in the meantime, check out his website, www.inthisplace.org.

What is monogamous, omnivorous and wily?

Most of Jennifer Leith's Mayo School 4th grade students know that **Coyote!** is the answer. White Oak's nature education program brought a guest coyote sleuth to her class in January. Cornell undergraduate Caleb Dresser told the 9-year-olds about his winter-break project: tracking coyote behavior in the North Holden woods. The kids learned that the coyote can run at 40 mph, can live on garden melons when little animals (prey) are scarce, and tends to mate for life. The class then went into their outdoor classroom of the Mayo Forest (a wild tract of 94 acres between Bullard and Malden Streets), looking for signs of animal habitat.



Patch Ryan and Tyler Stephens enjoy Caleb Dresser's visit to Mayo School

Mr. Dresser's visit led into the class's next environmental project: each student will research and report on one of the up to 34 mammals likely to find habitat in the Mayo Forest.

The Nature Education Committee welcomes new members or volunteers interested in supporting teachers' nature education efforts in the local schools. For more information, call Nancy Wilson (508) 829-5739.

THE BEST REMEDY FOR THOSE WHO ARE AFRAID, LONELY OR UNHAPPY IS TO GO OUTSIDE, SOMEWHERE WHERE THEY CAN BE QUIET, ALONE WITH THE HEAVENS, NATURE AND GOD. BECAUSE ONLY THEN DOES ONE FEEL THAT ALL IS AS IT SHOULD BE AND THAT GOD WISHES TO SEE PEOPLE HAPPY, AMIDST THE SIMPLE BEAUTY OF NATURE.

— ANNE FRANK



WHITE OAK LAND
CONSERVATION
SOCIETY

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White Oak is a member of the MA Land Trust Coalition and the Land Trust Alliance.

Teachers benefit from White Oak Fellowships

The Massachusetts Environmental Education Society, or MASSMEES, holds its annual educators' conference at Holy Cross College in March. Two White Oak members scouted out the day in '05 and found the program so rich in resources and ideas that this year we offered fellowships to Holden teachers. Five intrepid teachers took us up on this offer: Asst. Principal Kathy McCollum from Davis Hill; 4th grade teachers Liz Warner and Nancy Paul from Dawson; 4th grade teacher Jen

Leith from Mayo, and Jen Schmohl from the Mountview 7th grade faculty. They had to choose among more than 30 workshops at the conference, such as "Teaching using outdoor classrooms" and "Who worked, lived and loved the land before Mass Audubon came along?". They've told us how much they appreciated our giving them the full day of environmental learning – something their schools can't provide. We know their students will benefit from their new knowledge!



Kids Need a Green Hour Every Day

“Go outside and play” was a common refrain heard around the neighborhood in years past, but not any more. This marked departure from behavior patterns of earlier American generations means that for the first time in our country’s history, an entire generation is growing up disconnected from nature.

A study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that the average American child spends 44 hours per week (six hours a day!) staring at some kind of electronic screen – TV, video games, computers. Author Richard Louv refers to this “nature deficit disorder” as a most disturbing but preventable trend. Too much television watching has been scientifically linked to obesity and other problems in kids. Indoor kids are

almost always less healthy than their outdoor counterparts.

Children benefit greatly from spending unstructured time outside. In addition to creative play, they learn practical skills and how to experiment in the physical world. Their stress levels go down and their imaginations soar. They become fitter and leaner, and their immune systems grow stronger. Time spent surrounded by nature helps young people see where they fit in the world, the value of wildlife and wild places, and the true meaning of conservation.

To counter this nature deficit disorder trend, the National Wildlife Federation recommends that parents give their kids time every day for unstructured play and interaction with the natural world. This can be in a

garden, a backyard, the park down the street, or any place that provides safe and accessible green spaces to learn and play. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Take your child on a nature walk.
- Put up a bird feeder
- Go camping in the backyard
- Create a backyard wildlife habitat
- Go fishing
- Go on a bug hunt
- Get to know your local nature center
- Send your child on a nature scavenger hunt.

More ideas can be found at www.nwf.org/greenhour

(Adapted from the Grass & Grain newsletter, Feb. 28, 2006)

Please Join Us For

*The “It’s No Longer Winter!” Carnival**

Sunday, April 30, 2006, 12-3pm

Trout Brook on Manning St., Holden

As always, the program includes hayrides, cross-cut saw contests, guided nature walks, a Sing Along (new feature!), live local music, kids’ activities, homemade chili and desserts, Starbucks® coffee and cider, fishing instruction and a bonfire

Fun for all, and it’s free!

** blizzard cancelled original February 12 date*

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