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Rick Roth, president of the Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team, wades in to the water at Pigeon Cove in Rockport to find amphibian egg masses.

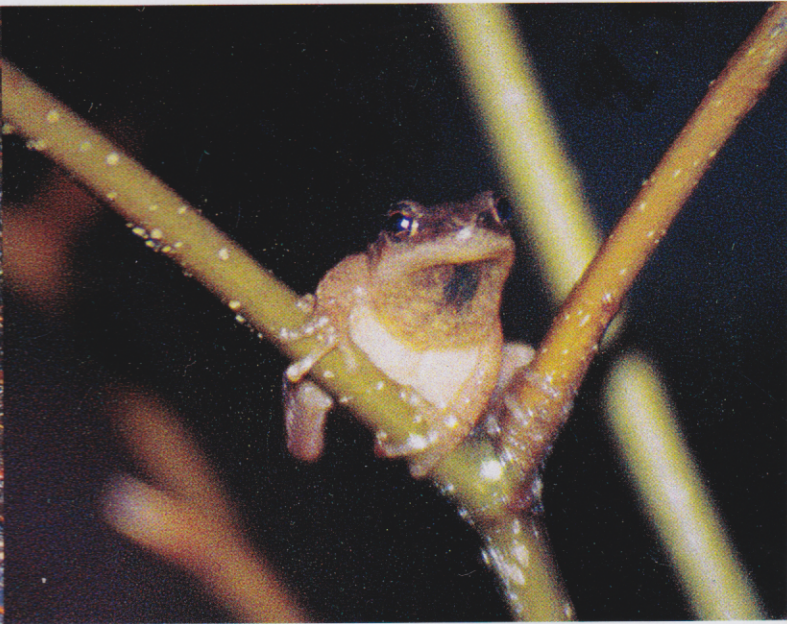
# Diving into VERNAL POOLS

By SARA LENOE • *Photos courtesy of CAPE ANN VERNAL POND TEAM*





This spotted salamander was found on a nighttime field trip migrating to a vernal pond to breed.



This spring peeper frog was photographed by the Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team during one of the team's night outings.

## For two decades, a swelling team of conservationists has committed to protecting the habitats that keep alive the critters of Cape Ann

It's a clear April night after a dreary week of rain when I pull into the parking lot in downtown Gloucester, near Walgreens.

Outside my car, I feel vulnerable wandering the pavement, though the briny harbor scent is comforting.

A few people are gathered by a white van and towering among them is a burly-looking man who greets me affably. He turns out to be Rick Roth, executive director of the nonprofit Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team, who confirms that I'm in the right.

Every spring starting in March and lasting through April or early May, all over Cape Ann elusive amphibians are on the march to small water bodies called vernal pools, or ponds. This is where they breed, at the same time providing a rare opportunity for people to observe them.

Roth and his colleagues have tracked this amphibian migration every spring for the past 20 years, leading field trips to ponds in Gloucester and Rockport and raising awareness of this recurring wildlife phenomenon.

Like so many others who seize the opportunity, I've been drawn to this parking lot by my desire to become a witness. I am especially excited to see spotted salamanders, strikingly marked natives that spend most days concealed underground.

"They're so cute. It's no wonder that they're a real poster boy for vernal pools because they look like a cartoon," Roth tells me. "And they get really big."

Most people don't associate salamanders with these husky 5- to 8-inch-long creatures, he says.

We caravan over to Ravenswood Park, where Roth distributes flashlights for those who arrived without them, or with insufficiently puny ones, as in my case. It's important to have strong illumination, he tells us, to help avoid trampling any wildlife.

Soon, 15 or so people — mostly adults and a few children — take a short walk behind shimmering lights to the edge of Stillington Pond. Stars glimmer through the black boughs overhead.

Many of these field trips take place when it's ➤



Photo by KATE GLASS

Rick Roth, executive director of the nonprofit Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team, shows off one of his many snakes that he takes to stage shows titled, "Snakes of New England and the World."







## THE CAPE ANN VERNAL POND TEAM

On rainy spring nights, the non-profit Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team leads field trips to area pools for critter spotting. The team also stages presentations throughout Massachusetts and beyond, including an in-demand snake show.

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aining, which helps amphibians keep their permeable skin moist while they travel over land. We don't see any on the move tonight. Given recent rains, however, Roth expects the pool to be active with critters that have arrived over the past few days.

Within moments of reaching the pond's edge, we collectively inhale with surprise. Roth and a few experienced team members have aimed their lights at spotted salamanders resting in the murky water. The amphibians' midnight skins are beaded with improbably neon-yellow spots staring from the dark leaf litter of the pool.

Roth says the females are the ones in "the pose," draped along submerged sticks in what appears an egg-laying trance. We can see a jelly-like egg mass below one, a faint bluish tint.

Now and then a salamander resting on the bottom launches for the surface, legs pressed to sides, its long body and tail undulating gracefully. It pokes its muzzle above the water for a breath then sinuously descends.

Gasps and exclamations ensue as Roth and others show us diminutive frogs clinging to dried stems next to the pool. Maybe as long as the tip of my thumb, their throats inflate like mini gum bubbles as they belt forth piercing calls.

The spring peeper has "got to be one of the loudest animals in the world for its size," Roth says.

Most people are aware of the "deafening chorus of frogs that they've always heard from way over somewhere but never got out in the middle of," he says. "Most people have never seen a spring peeper."

### A CONSERVATION TEAM IN THE MAKING

The Vernal Pond Team started as just a few individuals, including Roth, getting together to go out looking for frogs and salamanders during the migration season. None among the group had formal training in biology.

Roth is a carpenter with a high school education. Today, he's also employed as a part-time field biologist, thanks to his self-acquired expertise.

"What are you doing?" they would ask the other people they ran into on their nighttime forays.

"Looking for salamanders," the others would answer.

Since they all were on the same mission, they began to band together and their group grew to about a dozen. Together they learned more and more about the ponds.

Most vernal pools dry up completely for part of the year, until melted snow and rain fill them up again.

Due to low oxygen content and transience they stay fish free, which makes for a safer place for other creatures to stash their eggs and young. Also because of their fleeting nature and small size, the ponds don't show up on most maps.

"They're not really automatically protected by the Wetlands Protection Act (of Massachusetts), because it's hard to protect something that you don't even know exists," Roth explains.

In time, he and his fellow pool enthusiasts heard about certification,

a documentation process by which the ponds can be classified as official vernal pools through the state's Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program. This affords them a certain amount of protection under the Wetlands Protection Act.

"The state doesn't have the manpower to send out all these people to certify vernal pools," Roth says. "The burden was kind of put upon the individuals to either pay a field biologist to go out and do this stuff, or volunteers to go out and look at the pond and document the right kind of critter activity."

He estimates Cape Ann is home to well over 300 vernal ponds.

"I can't even imagine how many thousands and thousands there must be across the state," he says.

In Gloucester and Rockport, the team has certified close to a hundred pools with the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program, as well as leading many training workshops in certification. The certification process involves submitting photographs of pools and breeding activity taking place in them and pinpointing their location.

"Our focus is vernal pools, but the issue is really the preservation of wildlife habitat and vernal pools are hot spots of activity," Roth explains. "They just feed enormous amounts of wildlife, more so than any other kind of wetland ... so they're just critical habitat."

Ultimately, he says, their work is about the health of the planet. And through it, they also aspire to spark the interest of people from other communities to form similar conservation groups.

The Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team received federal tax-exempt nonprofit status in 2006. Over the years, it has garnered a number of grants and donations, too.

Still, Roth says, "We are terribly underfunded. We don't have enough money to do what we are doing now, let alone do as much as we'd like to."

The banner on the organization's annual newsletter echoes this: "CAVPT is a hopelessly nonprofit volunteer organization ..."



## THE POOL OF LIFE

At Stillington Pond, amphibians are not the only attraction.

Roth and the team shine lights on a variety of aquatic insects and one swimming leech that draws another round of exclamations. Its ribbon-like body ripples silkily through the water.

Never before having seen a leech, I am astonished to find it is a thing of beauty.

Though there are no fairy shrimp in this pool, Roth talks a bit about these tiny freshwater relatives of ocean shrimp and lobsters that depend upon vernal pools throughout their life cycle.

I'm noticing his gift for infusing others with a zeal for critters; hearing him describe the back-swimming fairy shrimp ignites my desire to see one. They are observed in about a quarter of the pools visited during field trips, and sometimes over the winter he'll find a spot of clear ice and see the shrimp swimming around beneath it.

The team regularly captures shrimp and other vernal pond animals to take to its many educational presentations, returning the creatures to the same pool they came from after the shows.

Fairy shrimp are displayed for audiences in a fish bowl.

"It's a ballet in a goldfish bowl. You can just sit there and be mesmerized by them," Roth says.

He vividly remembers the very moment he became enamored of wild critters.

"I was on my way home from kindergarten and I was just walking down the sidewalk. And I noticed this little depression next to somebody's driveway and there was a little snake coiled up in it. It turned out to be a northern brown snake."

He picked it up, took it home and put it in a cardboard box.

"I think it got out about 10 minutes later and I never saw it again," he says. "But I was completely hooked."

## SNAKES AMONG THEM

Roth has been keeping snakes at home almost continuously ever since. He currently shares his Gloucester place with about 70 of them and they have become ambassadors for the Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team.

Roth and a crew of volunteers transport the snakes to stage shows titled, "Snakes of New England and the World." At the events, audience members are allowed to touch and hold them.

The Girl Scouts are hooked, Gloria Parsons tells me.

"They adore the snakes," says Parsons,



A typical vernal pond in spring, small and shallow, filled with rainfall and snow melt.

who is the Girl Scout Service Unit Coordinator for Cape Ann. "Every year the girls (and me) had to hold the snakes. We really love them."

Through their interactions with the team, the Scouts were inspired to create a vernal pool patch program.

"The intention of the girls (was) to bring awareness of vernal ponds," Parsons says. "It's been a great program the kids have had fun with."

She estimates that around 25 area Girl Scouts have earned their Vernal Pond Patches. She even got a request for a patch from a scout in Minnesota.

Boys, too, have participated in the program. Twenty-five Cub Scouts from Manchester earned patches just last year.

Snakes have snagged a number of new volunteers for the team, too. Diane Bevins of Gloucester describes how her son's interest sparked that of the whole family.

"(Sam) had been going to Rick's snake shows since he discovered them at probably age 5," she says. "Of course Rick would always ask questions. He'd pull a snake out: 'Does anybody know what this is?' and Sam would always know the answer. So finally Rick would say, 'Anybody but you,'" motioning toward Sam, she recalls.

"Eventually we said, 'You have got to start working with us,'" Roth says of Sam, who was about 8 years old when the whole Bevins family, including Diane's husband, Jonathan, and daughter, Kate, signed on as volunteers.

They have been participating ever since.

"Without the volunteers we'd be nowhere," Roth says.

Volunteers drive their own cars to make the shows happen, donating time, gas dollars and countless other contributions, Roth says.

Lisa Hutchings, a teacher-naturalist at Newburyport's Joppa Flats Education Center, has called upon the volunteers for three years.

"We've found them to be absolutely wonderful to work with," she says. "The first time we had Rick come, he went so beyond our expectations."

Annual public events were organized to draw more people to the events at Joppa.

"At the top of my list of presenters to ask was Rick, because when he comes he brings two or three staff people; he sets up an entire display that explains all about their mission," Hutchings says.

He also brings five to 10 tanks of live amphibians, frog eggs, and salamanders and reptiles.

"He's just got an incredible variety of live animals that he brings," Hutchings says.

"It's all Sam's fault!" his mom asserts with a good-natured laugh, referencing the Bevins family's involvement.

Now 13, Sam and his family work many snake shows.

"I had a little bit of apprehension," says Diane. "But Rick puts you at ease pretty easily. And of course when my son would be doing it quite comfortably it certainly helped me to think, 'OK, this is an OK thing.'"

Snakes generally travel to shows inside separate pillowcases. Roth says that snakes are secretive. They like to hide.

"Different snakes have different personalities," Diane says. "Most of the snakes that Rick brings to a show are able to be handled by most people, because the whole idea is to bring it around and let people touch it and hold it. But there are a few that are notoriously crabby. Those are the ones we usually joke with each other about 'Now here you go: You take this one!'" ➤



Sam's favorite show animal is the 7-foot tropical rat snake.

"He's very easy to handle," he says. "Some of the bigger snakes are a little more heavy bodied and he's a little bit skinnier so he's not as heavy. And he's pretty easy to control and very docile."

## INSIDE THE SNAKE'S DEN

After hearing so much about the snakes, I'm eager to meet them in person. And Roth is delighted to oblige.

He ushers me into the specially renovated room at his home, where every nook is utilized ingeniously.

"When you're tight for space, being a carpenter doesn't hurt," Roth says.

A small converted refrigerator serves as an incubator for snake eggs, which need to be kept near 80 degrees Fahrenheit.

Roth shows me a clutch of hatched eggs – pale elongated oblongs.

"They're not like chicken eggs. They're kind of gooey and leathery," he says. "They actually take on water and grow as they incubate."

Roth gently retrieves a slender snake from its plastic holding container.

"Here's a cuddly little snake," he says, holding out a creature of extravagant greenness beyond anything I've seen.

Aptly named the green snake, it's a native of Massachusetts that Roth tells me is hard to see in its meadow habitat since it blends in so well with the vegetation.

Roth lifts snake after snake for me to see. Soon I'm edging into a pleasurable state of sensory overload brought on by the spectrum of earthy and eye-popping tones I've been shown, mingled in intricate patterns and glosses.

I feel like I've been scrutinizing art.

Roth lifts out yet another snake and I feel yet another bloom of wonder. This one he calls a white-lipped python, though I never think to look at her lips. Her base colors are velvety chocolates melding with ambers, while her entire skin shimmers with an overlay of rainbow iridescence.

Incredibly, Roth says she is at her most dull just now, since she is preparing to shed her skin.

## SAFE TO GROW

The phenomenon proves undeviating: Each time I interact with Roth, I come away with this transfusion of enthusiasm for the creatures he covets.

Kindred spirit Sam Bevins' fascination with reptiles and amphibians runs deeply, too.

"Not a lot of people find them to be

interesting and they're very misunderstood," Sam says. "And they need more people to know more about them."

Research confirms his sentiments.

Amphibians, in particular, are in need of human focus right now. According to ecologist Dr. Bryan Windmiller, "amphibians take the cake for being the most threatened" group of animals on Earth. Among birds, about 12 percent are threatened with extinction. Among mammals it's 24 percent. Among frogs and salamanders, at least 38 percent could become extinct.

Driving home from Gloucester, the setting crescent moon is positioned like a smile and I feel energized by the field trip.

At one point, Roth trained his light into a rock crevice where a spotted salamander was waiting for the next rainfall before entering the pool.

Roth patiently made sure each of us got a peek at the sleek creature. When my turn came, I felt a bloom of gratitude that he and the team had allowed me this glimpse into a world I'd never known.

The Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team created a safe haven in the dark woods for me to visit on this night.

Thankfully, their work makes the night woods a safer place for Cape Ann's small creatures, too. 