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THE MAGAZINE OF THE SIERRA CLUB





Rick Roth, Gloucester, Massachusetts; executive director, Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team

## SNAKE CHARMER

**"A LOT OF PEOPLE KNOW ME** as 'Snake Man' now and don't know my real name. I've always been a critter person. My mother was never afraid of anything, and I used to actually get to keep snakes in the house. I'm 58, so this was a long time ago, when *nobody* got to keep snakes in the house. I've got 75 or so now at home—and a really cool landlord.

"I found out at a pretty early age that I would look at things like dragonflies for longer than most people, and then I would notice things about them. You look at a monarch butterfly, and it's absolutely gorgeous. But then you look closer, and it's got this jet-black body with white polka dots. Who thought *that* up?

"What I love to do is show people stuff that they haven't seen before. Our team does snake shows to get people up close with the snakes. We also do nighttime field trips to vernal ponds. A lot of people have never seen a spotted salamander, and you can pretty

well bet they haven't seen, like, a thousand of them in one night or this wild breeding activity. Sometimes we bring a goldfish bowl out, especially if there's fairy shrimp. You get six or seven of them in the goldfish bowl and it's an underwater ballet.

"Vernal ponds usually dry up by summertime, and they have the unique ecology of being fishless. They're a lunch counter for wildlife—they may be one of the most important wetlands that we have, and yet they're the last ones to get protected. Massachusetts was the first state to offer protection through a certification program, but basically it's up to individuals to go out and certify these pools. Our group has helped certify more than 100 so far.

"The other piece is raising awareness. Every spring we get up to 50 people to show up for our nighttime field trips, and that's another 50 people who are becoming inspired."

—interview by Sara Martel



**FROGSICLES** The wood frog, a widespread species that relies on vernal ponds for breeding, can weather New England winters by freezing virtually solid.

**► ON THE WEB** Learn more about the Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team at [capeannvernalpond.org](http://capeannvernalpond.org). Watch a video on worldwide amphibian declines at [amphibiaweb.org/declines](http://amphibiaweb.org/declines).