

Salamanders Need a Home

By Jonathan Regosin and Richard B. Primack, Reprinted from the *Newton Tab*, August 10, 2016



Spotted Salamander

Children in Newton often see 2- 3-inch-long red-backed salamanders when turning over rocks, logs and boards in forests and backyards. Newton also has larger yellow-spotted and blue-spotted salamanders. However,

you would be lucky to see even one of either of them in decades of turning over rocks. The adults live underground for 11 months of year. Nicknamed mole salamanders, they are like a rarely seen neighbor who never leaves the house.

The recent sale of a large section of the Webster Woods to Boston College threatens what is likely Newton's largest population of yellow-spotted salamanders. Thoreau spoke forcefully of the need to protect such wild animals from destruction, remarking, "I am glad to recognize [a great blue heron] for a native of America why not as an American citizen?" Taking our cue from Thoreau, we hope that Newton residents will act to protect our fellow salamander "citizens" who make their homes in Webster Woods.

Compared to red-backed salamanders, spotted salamanders are massive. They are 4-6 inches long, have the girth of an index finger, and look almost pudgy. People usually see adult spotted salamanders on the first warm rainy nights of March, when they migrate to breed in vernal ponds — small ponds that dry out in summer and lack predatory fish. Spotted salamanders congregate at the shallow margins of such pools, looking for mates.

After the eggs hatch, children can find juvenile salamanders in the water and catch them (for brief observation) with dip nets. When the pools dry out in summer, the young salamanders depart for the surrounding forests, and then return to breed in later years. Many other amphibians such as wood frogs and a great diversity of insects also depend on fish-free vernal pools to complete their life cycles.

In Newton, blue spotted salamanders are found at only one location along the Charles River. Yellow-spotted salamanders live in a few Newton locations, and most abundantly in the Webster Woods at Bare Pond on land now owned by Boston College. It is called Bare Pond because it dries out or is "bare" during the summer. In the spring, nature lovers enjoy lying on rocks at the edge of the small pond where they can study the diversity of small insects, red water mites, and assorted crustaceans moving through the shallow water. Later in the year, many Newton residents enjoy the colorful autumn leaves and bring children to skate and run around on the ice in winter.

It is hard to know how many yellow-spotted salamanders live in Webster Woods, but a reasonable guess would be several hundred adults. Spotted salamanders are protected by state law; people are not allowed to collect or possess spotted salamanders, and vernal pool habitats and the surrounding forest are given some enhanced protections. In some Massachusetts communities, local bylaws give vernal pools even greater protection than state wetlands law, and roads are even temporarily closed to protect salamanders during their spring migrations.

Newton's parks and conservation areas support an incredible diversity of native plants and animals and offer unique opportunities for nature study, research, and reflection. As the effects of climate change and warming temperatures continue to be felt, and invasive species such as buckthorn and garlic mustard spread, we can monitor the persistence of native species in the face of these changes— and in some cases intervene to restore native habitats. For example, the Newton Parks and Recreation Department and the Newton Conservators are restoring a meadow for American woodcocks in Nahanton Park, both protecting nature and enhancing the quality of life for Newton residents. With an already high population density and with more home construction on the way, our open spaces offer valuable resources for people to experience nature firsthand, whether to see displaying woodcocks at Nahanton Park, vernal pools in the Webster Woods, or wildflowers and turtles along the Charles River.

The future of Bare Pond and the surrounding upland forest habitat where adult spotted salamanders live now hangs in the balance with the recent sale of a large part of the Webster Woods to Boston College. Developing any of the land just beyond the pond could directly harm salamanders living in the ground and indirectly damage the water quality of the pond.

A little over a decade ago, the city was at a similar crossroads, with Newton's last farm for sale and at risk of being developed. Although many people said it couldn't be done, the community came together to save the farm, and we now have a thriving, economically self-sustaining community farm that is held up as a model for the use of Community Preservation funds. We now face a similar opportunity where action is urgently needed to protect a unique natural area in the Webster Woods for the yellow-spotted salamander, other forest creatures, and future generations of Newton residents. ■

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