



# NEWTON CONSERVATORS

FALL ISSUE

# NEWSLETTER

Newton's land trust working to preserve open space since 1961

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## Conservation Begins at Home

By Jon Regosin, *Chief of Conservation Science for the National Heritage & Endangered Species Program of Massachusetts*



*American Toad*



*Red-backed Salamander*

Once in a while, I find a toad in my garden. Throughout much of the state, this observation wouldn't be noteworthy as American Toads are nearly ubiquitous. In Newton and other densely developed urban/suburban areas, however, toads are uncommon due to limited availability of wetland breeding habitat. In most Massachusetts landscapes, toads and many other common wildlife species are widespread "matrix" species, occupying both open space and private lands. In Newton, many of our native plants and animals, from birds to trees to frogs, are highly dependent on parks and conservation lands for their continued survival. My toad, by the way, apparently braved Walnut Street and traveled at least 800 feet from the nearest breeding pool to make it to my humble abode.

For wildlife enthusiasts, understanding the distribution of otherwise common species such as Red-backed Salamanders, Red-eyed Vireos, Red Squirrels and Yellow Birch here in Newton becomes an interesting exercise. How about slightly less common, more cryptic, or more disturbance-sensitive species? Flying squirrels, Eastern Newts, Spotted Turtles? How many bird species breed in Newton? Snakes? Turtles? While a glass half empty approach would emphasize how little natural habitat remains, during my wanderings in Newton open spaces, I am always struck by the incredible diversity and resilience of the native plants, animals, and natural communities that occupy our open spaces.

So why should we care about remnant natural areas and habitat patches that persist in densely developed communities such as Newton? While it's easy to dismiss the conservation value of urban oak forests, red maple swamps, and vernal pools, some would argue that these urban wilds are uniquely important, worthy of our respect, enjoyment, stewardship, and study. First, Newton's parks and conservation lands provide genuinely important oases of habitat for migratory and resident species alike. Without these habitat patches, many species such as Wood Thrush and Spotted Salamander would disappear from our urban/suburban landscape. With sound stewardship, we can ensure that these lands continue to support a diversity of plants and animals well into the future.

*...Conservation Begins At Home continued from page 1*

Second, these are *our* parks and conservation lands right here in *our* community. By appreciating, studying, and managing our open spaces, we can develop a connection to the land and a strong conservation ethic. As human societies become increasingly urban, the idea of biodiversity conservation runs the risk of becoming increasingly abstract. Places like Nahanton Park and Hammond Woods enable Newton residents to connect to nature directly, and repeatedly, across seasons and years. This can't be replicated through screens and books. Similarly, our parks and conservation lands provide unique hands-on learning opportunities for school children.

Through its volunteer work days, guided nature walks, small grants program, and advocacy, the Newton Conservators is already deeply engaged in education and stewardship tied to Newton parks and conservation lands. As opportunities for large scale land protection decrease over time, the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program at MassWildlife, where I work, is increasingly focused on active land management to protect our investment in public land. Without this investment we risk losing the ecological, scenic, and recreational values of the land we purchased at considerable expense. The Newton Conservators, also facing limited land protection opportunities, is in a unique position to promote (1) stewardship, (2) biological inventory and monitoring, and (3) education tied to Newton's open spaces.

**Stewardship** – Unfortunately, our natural areas often require active management to maintain the biological diversity they currently support. As highlighted on the Newton Conservators website, invasive species such as Black Swallow-wort, Japanese Knotweed, Garlic Mustard, and Buckthorn threaten to overwhelm our natural areas, driving out native species and diminishing habitat values. Invasive Black Locust and even excessive intrusion of native species such as White Pine and Red Cedar can threaten unique habitat areas such as the upper “Woodcock Field” at Nahanton Park. While dedicated public servants may be interested in invasive control and habitat management projects, they have limited resources for these projects. For many years the Newton Conservators have steadily removed Garlic Mustard, Japanese Knotweed, and the more recent-appearing Black Swallow-wort from public lands throughout the city. We can continue to play an important role planning, advocating for, and implementing this important work, perhaps with even more volunteer and student involvement.

**Inventory and monitoring** – My family likes to call me “turtle obsessed” because I spend much of my free time from April–September chasing turtles. But even for those of us who are less inclined towards obsession, there are endless opportunities to survey and monitor our open spaces to

gain a deeper appreciation and understanding of them and also to inform long-term management and engage people of all ages. While we already have a Christmas bird count, how about a Newton breeding bird survey? Vernal pool surveys? In my experience as we conduct such surveys, our knowledge, appreciation, and community of open space advocates grow, and we identify specific management needs (e.g. invasive Common Reed taking over one of the vernal pools in Hammond Woods). There are endless possibilities here.



*Looking for Salamanders on a Vernal Pool Walk*

**Education** – The Newton Conservators is already a leader in informal education through its nature walk series. We can do more, however, to support education tied to Newton open spaces, and particularly programming to engage students. At MassWildlife, one of our greatest privileges is to work with students on hands-on projects such as growing native plants or head-starting turtles for habitat restoration and population recovery projects. Here in Newton we have many opportunities for hands-on, local projects to advance conservation while providing unique educational opportunities. My friend and colleague, Bryan Windmiller of Concord, has worked with Newton public schools, and recently established a non-profit called Grassroots Wildlife Conservation. Their mission is “protecting the living treasures in our backyards,” and one of their mottos is, “We believe that conservation begins at home.” Through land stewardship, survey, and education, right here in Newton's open spaces, we can shape these words into realities. ■

*For links to additional information:*

1. <http://www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/dfg/dfw/wildlife-habitat-conservation/key-sites-protecting-our-investment-in-public-land.html>
2. <http://www.grassrootswildlife.org>