



**NEWTON
CONSERVATORS**

SPRING ISSUE

NEWSLETTER

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In Praise of Spring Ponds

Over 60 years ago I read *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau, and I can still recall his descriptions of ponds. He claimed a pond is: "... a landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is Earth's eye, looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature."

Every time I see reflections in Bare Pond in Webster Woods, I think of an eye reflecting the world back at me.

When the first thaws unlock winter's grip, I look for the first hints of spring in the wetlands and at pond edges: willow branches turning yellow green long before other trees



Skunk cabbage spathe in Cold Spring Park April 2021

and the emerging yellow-streaked, purplish spathes of skunk cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*).



Bare Pond inlet reflections in March 2022

Before its green leaves emerge, look for the skunk cabbage's well-camouflaged spathe — a claw-like structure containing the flowers on a spadix that looks like a tiny pineapple. These spathes sometimes push up through snow in February because the plant's giant, leek-like

root generates enough heat to warm the air around it to over 60 degrees. That heat helps the funky smell of the flowers attract the carrion-loving insects that pollinate the plant. By May one can barely see the claw-like spathes because the huge green leaves of the plant overshadow everything.

By March the vernal witch-hazel at the northwest corner of Bulloughs Pond has a beautiful patch of brilliant orange flowers.



Vernal witch-hazel blooms in March

Our native witch-hazel blooms yellow in the fall. Witch-hazel flowers have an amazing ability to survive cold by curling their petals into a ball to reduce water loss.

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Later in March, ponds and wetlands become veritable cauldrons of reemerging animal life. On the first relatively “warm” rainy night in March called “Big Night,” the yellow spotted salamanders and a wide variety of frogs from the uplands move down to the waters of Bare Pond, the vernal pool in Webster Woods, to mate. Some years there are multiple nights of migration. Vernal pools are special temporary ponds, and they provide these animals with protected breeding habitat. Because these pools dry up, no fish can live there.



A yellow spotted salamander leaving a rock crevice at Bare Pond on Big Night March 28, 2021

By the end of March, egg masses of both wood frogs and yellow spotted salamanders can be seen attached to shrub



Yellow spotted salamander egg mass at Bare Pond in late March 2021

and another case of jelly around the entire mass of eggs.



Wood frog egg mass at Bare Pond late March 2021

The adult wood frogs live the rest of the year in the upland leaf litter surrounding Bare Pond feeding on invertebrates.

branches in the shallower water by the edge of Bare Pond. The eggs are positioned close to the water surface to help the sun warm them and spur their development. The salamander egg masses have a jelly-like coating around each egg

Wood frog eggs, by contrast, lack the jelly-like coating for the eggs mass but still have a coating for each small black egg. Wood frogs will emerge as tadpoles and leave the pool as adult frogs in about six to 12 weeks depending on the temperature.

The yellow spotted salamanders take longer to develop — six to eight weeks simply to hatch and up to 16 weeks to mature into an adult large enough to be capable of surviving on land. This means the pool must sustain water until mid to late July. Sadly, for the 2022 breeding season at Bare Pond, Massachusetts experienced a severe drought, and the eggs of the yellow spotted salamander never hatched as documented at left. Luckily, yellow spotted salamanders can live up to 25 years, so there will be at least a few more opportunities for the remaining adults to reproduce at Bare Pond.

American toads mature a bit faster than the wood frogs and the salamanders. Dolan Pond is “toad heaven.” Visit in early spring and you will hear the beautiful trilling of the



Children love to watch the abundant American Toad tadpoles at Quinn Pond in May

American Toad — for the longest time I thought they were birds not toads! Visit later in May and you will encounter vast numbers of their tiny black tadpoles in Quinn and Dolan Ponds.

American toads lay their eggs in the shallows in long gelatinous spirals, one egg wide. The eggs develop into tadpoles in as little as three to seven days if it's

warm. The toadlets are mature enough to leave the water in another six to eight weeks. These toad tadpoles provide food for an amazing number of other animals including mallard ducks! I once saw a pair of mallards crisscross a tiny three-foot puddle at Dolan slurping up toad tadpoles like noodles.



Mallard ducklings feeding with mother on Quinn Pond in late May 2022

While walking east from Dolan Pond to Quinn Pond, look for five-toed tracks like little hands on the boardwalk. Raccoons, tired from foraging

for crayfish and other critters in the mud, often climb up and use the boardwalk for easier travel. When you arrive at Quinn Pond, watch for ducklings in late spring. Mallard ducks often breed there, and sometimes wood ducks use the nests boxes at both Quinn and Dolan to raise their babies.

One of my favorite ponds is in the Newton Cemetery & Arboretum. The very first pond in the string of ponds there was originally named Crystal Lake. It was, and still is, fed by Cold Spring Brook. The cemetery created three other ponds along the brook at the west of this first pond. Reflections in all these ponds on calm spring days when ornamental trees and shrubs are in bloom are stunning. But be careful to note the pond *bottom* while admiring the spring leaf-out, and you may see snapping turtle tracks in the silt there.



Large snapping turtle foraging at the 1st pond in the Newton Cemetery and Arboretum

Large snapping turtles mate in these cemetery ponds and then lay their eggs in nests on the Cemetery grounds. Hatchling survival rates are very low — less than half — and many nests are raided by predators before they can hatch, up to 90% in some studies. By August/September, if you are lucky, you may encounter hatchlings trudging across



The hatchling snappers we collected in September 2021 were barely an inch wide.

the lawns to the ponds. On September 2, 2021, staff member Pam Kelly alerted me to such a hatching. Pam's summer helpers, Katalan Stoddard & Allison

Shoebottom, helped round up 26 snapping turtle hatchlings and move them to three of the ponds before the lawn mowing started and before predators could eat them. I often wonder how many of those hatchlings survived the bull frog population in those ponds. I have yet to see a young snapper basking in those ponds.



A male Baltimore Oriole feeds its young at Newton Cemetery.

The trees around the cemetery ponds are perfect nesting habitat for Baltimore Orioles. The striking orange and black males sing beautiful, liquid songs during the spring mating season. You will have to look carefully to find their woven nests hanging

precariously from drooping branch tips high in deciduous trees by the ponds. By June it takes both parents to adequately feed their growing young all the caterpillars and other insects they need.

In contrast to the natural settings of Bare, Dolan, and the Cemetery ponds, Crystal Lake in Newton Centre is surrounded closely by housing. It is our largest pond ("29 acres of rain fed surface water" according to Newton's Open Space Plan) and the deepest — 31 feet deep at its deepest point. Still, Crystal Lake can provide many options for relaxation and renewal beside swimming. Levingston Cove on the southwest and Cronin's Cove on the north provide wonderful places to court one's soul, watch clouds and the weather, and spy on wildlife. A great blue heron routinely fishes the shallows at the northern edge of Levingston Cove, and at dawn/dusk you can sometimes catch a muskrat foraging there or on the eastern side of the lake.

The beauty of spring ponds certainly breaks the back of winter for me. It's not simply the beauty of their reflections that sooth my soul, but the burgeoning new life, seemingly immune to all we humans do to spoil it. I hope you will visit some of Newton's ponds and experience their restorative nature for yourselves.

You can learn more about all these ponds, accessing history, pictures, and trail maps on our Newton Conservators' website: www.newtonconservators.org ♦

— Barbara Bates