



For the littlest things in life

Discover the vitality of vernal pools



So much burgeoning life depends on temporary vernal pools. (Ray Roper photo)

By Carol Hillestad
For Pocono Heritage Land Trust

On a spring hike in the woods, one sure way to amaze a child (or a grownup!) is to discover a red eft along the trail. Glowing red-orange in the leaf litter, these tiny creatures light up the forest floor.

At barely 3 inches long and weighing less than a grape, red efts are one stage in the life of the red-spotted newt salamander. Their delicate toes and big eyes are appealing, but there is much more to their life story than just being adorable.

Red efts get their start in life in a special kind of forest wetland called a vernal pool. These shallow freshwater pools are fed by rain and snowmelt. They are the essence of ephemeral: They show up every year in the same places, last just a few months, and dry up by late summer.

But what a busy few months! Red-spotted newts, wood frogs, spring peepers, marbled salamanders, American toads, and many other kinds of native amphibians return to their home vernal pools to breed. The peeping, croaking, and calling can be nothing short of raucous!

Continued on reverse



Above: Red efts hang out at Cranberry Creek Preserve. (John Anzivino photo) Below: Kurmes Nature Preserve in Paradise Township, Pa., features a large vernal pool. (Bob Hare photo)



Protecting woodlands — and their life-giving vernal pools — is a big part of what we do at Pocono Heritage Land Trust.



The vitality of vernal pools

Continuing from front

The young hatch, grow and mature, safe from fish and other predators which only inhabit permanent waters. Fully grown, they leave the wetland, ready to live an air-breathing, land-dwelling existence.

These little dabs of life might not seem like much. And the fleeting spring waters where they breed may not seem “useful” on a human scale.

But looks can be deceiving.

Salamanders are hugely abundant in a healthy forest — so abundant that they outweigh

the biomass of many large mammals — making them a critically important source of food. Everything from owls to raccoons to bobcats to turtles have salamanders on the menu.

And those nondescript, “useless” vernal pools? Turns out they’re pretty darn indispensable. As the breeding ground for salamanders, vernal pools are an essential foundation of animal life in the forest.

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Don Miller, right, a co-founder of Pocono Heritage Land Trust, discusses the biology, dynamics, and importance of vernal pools and amphibians — and ways each of us can help keep them healthy and thriving. (Ray Roper photo)

DID YOU KNOW? “Vernal” comes from the Latin for “spring.”

For more about vernal pools: https://www.naturalheritage.state.pa.us/vernalpool_animal.aspx

For more about salamander biomass in woodlands: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/08/science/salamanders-hefty-role-in-the-forest.html>



POCONO HERITAGE LAND TRUST

ABOUT CONSERVING LAND

Founded in 1984, Pocono Heritage Land Trust is a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting the natural and cultural heritage of the Pocono region by conserving land and inspiring people to care for, enjoy and explore their natural world. PHLT works cooperatively with landowners to preserve their property and leave a legacy of protected natural habitats, healthy forest, clean waterways and open space for future generations.

You can help Pocono Heritage Land Trust protect land for the future. Learn about membership and volunteer opportunities at www.phlt.org.

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