



Friends of Thacher State Park

Emma T Thacher Nature Center • 87 Nature Center Way • Voorheesville, NY 12186
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Annual Yellow Spotted Salamander Rescue 2022

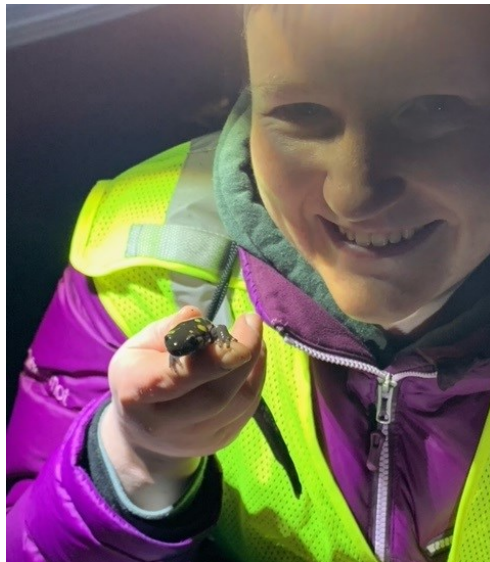
John Boyd Thacher State Park is home to a number of amphibians, but it is the Yellow Spotted Salamander (*Ambystoma maculatum*) and Jefferson Salamander (*Ambystoma jeffersonianum*), that have been the primary focus of our annual salamander rescue event. The 5 to 9 inch Yellow Spotted Salamander has a surprisingly long life span (over a decade) and takes several years to mature enough to breed. Both salamanders are nocturnal (night active) and are rarely seen in the park other than during their annual spring migration to breed, preferably to the same vernal pools each year. They spend much of their time under the forest floor or in logs and crevices found throughout the park.

This migration occurs anywhere from mid-March to early April, on the first warm rainy nights above 40°F. At Thacher Park a significant population of salamanders near the Hop Field parking area must cross the road to reach one or more vernal ponds. In order to reduce the number that might be run over by vehicles, volunteers outfitted in bright reflective vests carrying a bucket and flashlight can be seen walking up and down this road section looking for salamanders about to cross. Any found are carefully picked up and placed in a bucket for release on the other side of the road.

Being weather dependent, close monitoring of the forecast is crucial to determining when the migration will occur. Slight rain and temperature variations impact when and how long migrations occur, but it is the major road crossing sometimes referred to as the "Big Night" when volunteers are most needed. At Thacher Park, over the past several years volunteers have been successfully rescuing the salamanders on their migratory journey. But the "Big Night" has been elusive, likely due to perfect rain conditions late at night. During smaller migrations, only a few volunteers are needed and this year was no different, but it is the "Big Night" when a call list of volunteers is helpful. If interested in volunteering, please contact the Park Office or the Emma

Treadwell Nature Center to provide your contact information. Since this is a State Park, when a rescue event is announced, attending volunteers must fill out a volunteer form which will be provided when checking in at the Hop Field warming room.

On March 19th, an incredibly warm evening above 50°F, myself and another volunteer, John Vendettie, caught 13 Yellow Spotted and one Jefferson Salamander. Rain did not start until 8:45 pm and lasted less than an hour, with the moon shining brightly before 10 pm. Some salamanders were anxious and the first one rescued was actually crossing a mostly dry road, and others were seen sitting at the edge of crevices waiting for rain/darkness.



Being such a short window of opportunity, the next warm wet night occurred March 24th, attracting three new volunteers, Rachael Netzband (photo) and Chet and Teri King, to the annual rescue. Unfortunately, the forecast kept changing so conditions kept the salamanders from emerging from the forest floor or the many crevices nearby. With no crossings observed, we explored a known vernal pond and found it alive with salamanders and fresh eggs masses, possibly from salamanders John Vendettie and I rescued and released there the first night. Success!

The elusive "Big Night" finally occurred on March 31st, this time these same enthusiastic volunteers rescued four Yellow Spotted Salamanders, though several others were also seen mortally wounded. Another trip to the vernal pond that night showed it to be teeming with amphibian life. But as Nature has its own schedule, right after the volunteers went home, it started to rain much harder and while collecting the road safety flares, Yellow Spotted Salamanders were seen streaming out of the road sides in numbers I had not observed in a few years. Just a case of being there at the very right time. Before this, I was starting to wonder if road salts or other factors were having a major impact on the population of Yellow Spotted Salamanders.

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Starting around 9:45 pm, I picked up well over a dozen in a short amount of time. For the first time I observed two crossing back to the cliff side, likely after their visit to vernal ponds. However, for personal safety reasons being alone with low visibility due to rain, combined with very little traffic I watched more cross safely. I was able to head home feeling great that the “Big Night” still occurs along this road section.

For those interested in helping with Annual Spring Amphibian Crossings, consider volunteering or even adopting a known or “little” known spring amphibian crossing near where you live. The Amphibian Migrations & Road Crossings Project Volunteer Handbook can be found online at https://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/remediation_hudson_pdf/amrchandbook.pdf. Further resources about amphibian migrations and road crossing can also be found at <https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/51925.html>

Another significant way for those who drive to help is simpler: avoid unnecessary car travel where crossings might occur on these few warm rainy nights in the early Spring.

- by Bert Schou



Photo of rescued Yellow Spotted Salamanders (above) and volunteer Rachel Netzband with rescued salamander (previous page) by Chet King

Spring Transitions

As the weather warms, we are seeing more and more evidence of spring in the natural world. The last few weeks have witnessed amphibian and bird migrations, spring ephemerals poking through the leaf litter, buds on trees, and everyone’s favorite box turtle, Lady, coming out of her winter slump. But how do they all know that it’s spring?

Some plants and animals rely on temperature to determine when to make their spring transitions. Migrating amphibians are a great example – frogs and salamanders wait until the ground has thawed and temperatures rise above 40°F on a rainy night to move from their wintering grounds to the vernal pools where they breed in the spring. These cold-blooded animals require warm temperatures to get their muscles moving and allow them to make the journey to their vernal pools. This year, on the first night that met these conditions, Peter and I went out to Picard Road to help the amphibians cross safely. The temperature was just above 40°F and only a few spring peepers attempted to migrate. Those who braved the cold got stuck in the road, barely able to move. After that night, temperatures dropped back below freezing, posing a serious challenge for those early migrants who had left the safety of their wintering grounds. We waited another two weeks before conditions were ideal for migration. On Thursday March 31st, with light rain and an air temperature in the 50s, hundreds of amphibians crossed Picard Road. We now have lots of egg masses in vernal pools in the park, indicating a successful migration!

In addition to temperature, many species rely on increasing daylight hours to signal the start of spring. Maple trees, for example, require multiple months of cold winter weather, followed by increasing photoperiods, or hours of

daylight, in order to begin budding out. The challenge with using different strategies for detecting the start of spring is that warm spring weather has been occurring earlier due to climate change, while the length of photoperiods remains the same year to year. This discrepancy can result in phenological mismatches, which occur when species that typically interact with each other (pollinator and host plant, predator and prey, etc.) do not make seasonal transitions at the same time, disrupting their ability to interact. For example, if a pollinator relies on warm temperatures to begin its northern migration, but its host plant relies on increasing daylight hours to bloom, the pollinator is likely to arrive before the host plant blooms, creating problems for both the pollinator and the host. It will be interesting to see how different species adapt to new and increasingly significant phenological mismatches in the next few years and decades.

- by Marina Dreeben



Photos of wood frog and egg masses (left) and Jefferson Salamander (right) by Daniel Fleischman

Friends of Thacher Park Meeting Dates for 2022

Meeting dates are Wednesdays, May 11, July 13, September 14, and November 9.
7:00 pm at Thacher Visitor Center. Come join us! (Masks may be required)

The American Woodcock



After the snow has melted and the warmer temperatures have returned, the springtime air is filled with sounds that ring in the new season: chirping songbirds greeting a new day, the rolling murmur of a swelling stream, or a distant chorus of spring peepers. The soft, harmonic tones of these

evocative noises imbue this time of year with a dreamlike quality, and lull us with the promise of green trees, full gardens, and summer plans yet to come. But there is one underappreciated vernal sound that signals a change in the seasons as well as any other. If you happen to find yourself on the edge of an old field during a warm and dry spring evening, listen closely—you might be lucky enough to hear a loud and nasal “PEENT!”

Meet *Scolopax minor*, also known as the American woodcock, timberdoodle, bog sucker, or Labrador twister. These gamebirds are unique in seemingly every way. Notice, for example, the arrangement of its head: whereas most birds have eyes on the front or side of their heads, a woodcock’s eyes are instead located in the back of its head, partially behind its brain. This adaptation helps woodcocks keep an eye on their surroundings while they probe for food in the ground.

Because of their long and slender bills, it’s easy to confuse an American woodcock with its snipe or dowitcher cousins. But unlike these shorebirds, woodcocks prefer to live in swamps and young forests on the edge of meadows across the eastern United States. These habitats are home to their favorite foods, namely earthworms. While searching for a meal, woodcocks can be seen dramatically bobbing up and down on their legs as they roam the forest floor. Ornithologists believe that this dance-like motion helps woodcocks feel for pockets in the dirt where earthworms may be hiding.

With their long bills and funny dances, it’s tempting to believe that woodcocks are conspicuous creatures. But only the opposite is true; their deep camouflage and quiet demeanor makes them difficult to spot for even the most experienced birders. For a few hours on some spring mornings and evenings, however, its reclusive nature gets turned on its head. During the mating season, male woodcocks complete a courtship ritual—commonly called the “sky dance”—that is unlike any other in the bird world.

To begin, bachelors will find an open or partially covered area from which to advertise themselves, such as

a meadow or a young shrubland. Once found, each hopeful bird will make its presence known to prospective mates by sending out the famous “peent!” call, which can be heard over one hundred yards away. After vocalizing from the ground for a number of minutes, the bachelor will suddenly take off and fly in wide circles far overhead. Air passes rapidly through the bird’s wings during this flight, making a high-pitched tweeting noise that further advertises location. Lastly, the woodcock chirps a series of melodic notes (not unlike a songbird’s call) as it descends back to its starting location to begin the ritual anew.

After witnessing their spring mating routine, naturalist Aldo Leopold famously wrote that “The woodcock is a living refutation of the theory that the utility of a game bird is to serve as a target, or to pose gracefully on a slice of toast.” To see the sky dance for yourself, park at Knox Schoolhouse #5 on a dry spring evening and walk up the hill towards the Meadow Loop. Once there, listen for the iconic “peent!” calls rising from the fields around you, sometimes two or three at a time. And don’t be late—woodcocks prefer to call under the cover of darkness, and there is only a brief period of time immediately after sunset where the daylight is still strong enough to see them flying overhead.

- by Peter Farquharson

Native Plant Sale

Warm weather is finally arriving, and with it comes spring planting season! Whether you’re new to local plants or already have extensive native gardens, our Native Plant Sale has something for you. This year we’re focused on supporting hummingbirds and humming bird moths with plant species that meet the unique needs of these beautiful pollinators. Spring ephemerals that welcome hummers tired from their long migration, fuzzy ferns that grow the fluff used to line tiny nests, mid-season flower clusters that attract the tiny insects hummingbirds feed to their young, and flowers perfectly shaped for long-tongued feeding will all be available. Volunteers from the native plant nonprofit Wild Ones will be onsite to help you choose the plants that are right for you! Come see us at the **Thacher Park Overlook** on **Saturday, May 21 from 10am to 3pm**. (Note: due to the overwhelming success the 2022 presale we will NOT be holding the plant sale on Sunday this year.)

- by Shannon Duerr



Registration is still open at www.ptny.org! Hope to see you there! Please contact the park at 518-872-0800 with any questions.

Check for updates at www.friendsofthacherpark.org

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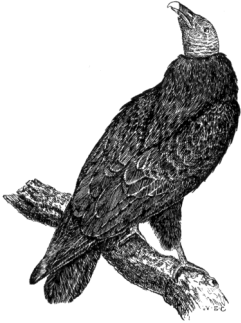
As always, call (518) 872-0800 or (518) 872-1237 to verify activity times and dates.

Please feel free to call board members with questions or suggestions.

Many thanks to Bert Schou, Marina Dreeben, Peter Farquharson, Shannon Duerr and Sigrin Newell for their contributions to this newsletter.

Christine Gervasi—Editor

Friends of Thacher Park
c/o Emma Treadwell Thacher Nature Center
87 Nature Center Way
Voorheesville, New York 12186-2601



<https://etc.usf.edu/clipart/>

Wednesday, May 11, 2022

Next:

Board Meeting

7:00 pm at Thacher Visitor Center (masks may be required)

Turkey Vultures: Evolutionary Marvel

The first migrating bird to return in the spring poops on its own feet. This first returning migrant is not a perky robin. Many robins overwinter and can be seen stripping winterberry bushes and other freeze-dried fruits in late January. The unlovely turkey vulture is the first true migrant to return. From late February onward, turkey vultures can be seen soaring on the updrafts of the Thacher escarpment. The upward V tilt of their wings and wobbly flight pattern make them easy to recognize.

Turkey vultures are ugly. People tend not to give them much thought. But these birds are an evolutionary marvel. They are superbly adapted to occupy a particular niche in the ecosystem. They play a vital role in the environment by cleaning up the flesh of dead animals before they rot and cause disease to spread.

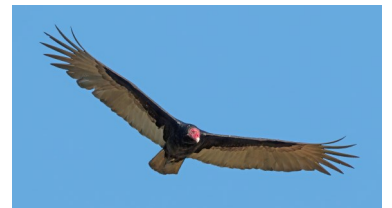
Turkey vultures are scavengers who can smell carrion from over a mile away. They eat any dead animals: raccoons, rabbits, coyotes, even dead cows. They have more than 500 different microbes on their skin and 75 microbes in the digestive system, all there to protect their bodies from bacteria in their decaying food. Their digestive juices and excrement are very acidic. When a turkey vulture encounters a dead animal it has to walk around on the creature to hold it steady while tearing flesh with its sharply hooked beak. When the bird defecates on its feet, excrement provides an effective antiseptic wash.

While hiking at Thacher in the early morning, you may see another way turkey vultures protect themselves from infection. These birds like to sunbathe with their wings held out wide. The sun's rays kill microbes tucked in among the feathers.

Vulture vomit is an effective predator repellent. The evil smell and eye-stinging gases of half-digested rancid meat can be ejected up to 10 feet away. Even the chicks are skilled at vomiting to protect themselves. A secondary advantage of this vomiting defense is that it makes the birds lighter and they can escape predators more easily.

Throughout the summer, you will see turkey vultures floating on thermal columns, pillars of hot air that arise from the sun-heated ground. They wobble in their flight as they veer to catch one updraft, then another. In the fall, they provide yet another environmental service. Migrating hawks can see turkey vultures from a great distance. The vultures troll the hawks to the elevating updrafts of the Thacher escarpment. Birdwatchers from all over assemble on the overlook to enjoy the annual hawk extravaganza. Mark your calendars to come to the annual HawkWatch in mid-September. You'll see some turkey vultures too.

- by *Sigrin T. Newell*



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Turkey_vulture_\(Cathartes_aura\)_in_flight.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Turkey_vulture_(Cathartes_aura)_in_flight.JPG)

As always, you can find a color version of the newsletter at www.friendsofthacherpark.org