

EXPLORING VERNAL POOLS AND OTHER AMPHIBIAN HABITAT

By Pixie Williams, Otisfield Conservation Committee

We have all heard mention of vernal pools, significant vernal pools and recently, possible changes to Maine vernal pool legislation. The regulations and potential changes to regulations have many of us confused and concerned.

The Audubon Society published an excellent brochure on vernal pools. It is free for the taking on the table beneath the bulletin board in the meeting room of the Otisfield town office. Please pick one up.

Some of the recent “how to” information on locating and documenting vernal pools is very detailed and complicated. It is so mired in “process” that it loses sight of “purpose”. Also, it is more applicable to municipalities larger than ours. The Otisfield Conservation Committee has decided to take a different approach. We want vernal pool exploring to be fun, exciting and not burdensome. After all, the main purpose of this initiative is to conserve our shrinking amphibian populations. Amphibians are a very important part of the food chain and these organisms are an indicator of ecosystem health. The fact that amphibians are in decline throughout most of the world is of major concern.

This year the Otisfield Conservation Committee is concentrating on significant known wetlands which already have some form of wetland protection or land conservation. We are going to keep a record of the species we find and we encourage you to do likewise. Learn your frog calls and see if you can identify the egg masses laid in the pools and ponds. Watch for tadpoles. Later, look for interesting visitors, turtles, snakes and wading birds who frequent these wetlands searching for a good lunch. You may see unusual turtles. Two of our turtle species are threatened or endangered.

Later in the summer, turn over rotten logs in the moist woodlands near the pool or pond to see if there is a salamander hiding beneath. This is where salamanders live and feed and why it is so important to provide shady woods with rotten logs left untouched on the forest floor. Remember, moisture and a damp habitat are essential for amphibian survival. Look in the trees in the

woods to see if you can spot a Tree Frog, Wood Frog or a Gray Tree Frog. Don't forget to peer at the edge of a permanent pond and see if you can find

2.

Green Frogs or Bull Frogs. Have you seen a toad relaxing under a large leaf in your garden?

The members of the Otisfield Conservation Committee are looking at their own properties and investigating sites where the owners have requested us to do so. The OCC is a small group and we are a rural town. There will be no knock on your door or a letter requesting permission to survey your property. It is far better to educate ourselves about the importance of protecting amphibians, vernal pools and permanent ponds where some amphibians breed. Getting to know and treasure your amphibian friends and understanding the importance of maintaining healthy populations of these creatures is a gentler and more caring way to proceed.

There is an interesting website which can provide you with identification guides: Just remember that you should investigate websites pertinent to Maine. Other States have species we don't have or vica-versa.

_____ <http://www.umaine.edu/vernalpools/> _____

There is also an excellent book that provides a great deal of information and contains a compact disc of frog calls. It can be purchased from our local bookstore in Norway or ordered directly from the U. Maine Press.

Maine Amphibians and Reptiles. 1999. ED. By Malcolm Hunter, Aram J.K. Calhoun, & Mark McCollough. University of Maine Press. Orono, ME