

No Newts is Bad News

Newport Forest Monday March 18, 2010 4:35 - 9:15 pm

weather: prec. 4 mm; RH 73%; BP 100.6 kPa; ovcast; W \leq 20 kmh; T 4° C

purpose: to sample vernal ponds

participants: Kee, Darren

We met at the gate and decided to use Darren's jeep, with its larger wheels and heavy-duty tires, leaving my van by Edgar Hurdle's fix-it garage. Crows, one of the few birds we would see in the few hours of daylight remaining, were calling everywhere, especially down in Eva's bottomland woods where Darren thought they might be mobbing a Great Horned Owl.

Darren Jacobs, who is one of the more active members of the Newport Stewards' Committee, would assist in the survey of vernal ponds. He brought news that the raccoon distemper outbreak was also showing up at Rondeau park, where he works.

We took the Thames River Trail in the usual counterclockwise direction, stopping on the river bluffs to inspect the river. Darren said the spring fish migration was now in full swing and that not only the pickerel were running, but a number of species that were probably not on our list, including the largemouth Buffalo (*Ictiobus cyprinellus*), a member of the carp family. He volunteered to bring a dip-net from home to leave in the river one evening (soon), then come to check it next day. It would be full of fish, he opined. I told him about the Giant Asian Carp that had just broken into the Great Lakes system from the Mississippi watershed, thanks to a canal joining the latter to Lake Michigan. Darren's face grew long when I detailed the havoc wreaked by this invader on fish populations in the Mississippi. How long would it take to reach Lake St. Clair and the Thames River?

We continued our journey into the RSF (Riverside Forest) where a lone black squirrel foraged. We took the spur line to the Sandbar, which Darren had not seen before. He immediately pointed out that it was an ideal nesting site for our Spiny Softshell Turtles -- or any other species of turtle. Maybe it was a good thing that fewer raccoons would be around, he thought. They are notorious nest-raiders. Interestingly, we found a few tracks of a subadult raccoon that had dug in three different spots. Near the edge of the Sandbar, we found some Colt's Foot halfway into their blooming phase. (P)

We followed the TRT up and over the Hogsback, then down into the BCF (Blind Creek Forest), where the vernal ponds awaited us. These are the relicts of creek pools (between riffles) before Fleming Creek found a new mouth into the Thames, leaving the former bed "blind" (hence the name). No Chorus Frogs were calling. Although it had rained, at times heavily, on the way down to Newport, the rain had ceased entirely by the time we were both on site. IF the salamanders were migrating into the ponds, it would be on a rainy night when the air temp was well above zero. We didn't quite qualify on either count, but I was driven by a fantasy ignited by the presenter at the McIlwraith Nature Club last Friday. Scott Sampson of the Ontario Vernal Pools Association, had given a glowing account of one migration where you could "walk on the backs" of the salamanders.

We ventured into the heart of the vernal pond area (a relict bed of Fleming Creek, before it found a new upstream outlet into the river. Here we found a clump of Skunk Cabbage, just emerging. (P) I pointed out all the Pileated Woodpecker digs as we repaired to the trailer for a sandwich supper. Relaxing with coffee after our meal, Darren was stung by a Paper Wasp that had been overwintering in the trailer. It had wandered into Darren's coat collar, stimulated by the heat of the gas stove. By 8:00 the rain promised by the weather channel had not materialized, but we went out anyway, noting that by then a few Chorus Frogs had started up. I also heard a Gray Tree Frog call twice. We sampled several of the vernal ponds each in several places, each time eagerly going through the leaf litter in the bottom of the net. Nada. Well, not quite: one lone (immature) Physa snail. We concluded that IF there were salamanders around at all, the migration had not yet taken place. There is some question, meanwhile, whether vernal ponds so heavily inundated by occasional massive river floods would actually support a population of salamanders.

It was getting late and Pat (who had declined to join what she predicted would be a failed mission) would be starting to worry. We closed up camp and left the property without difficulty.

birds: no records

new species: no records

phonology: Coltsfoot and Skunk Cabbage blooming, Gray Tree Frog calling

IMAGES:

(click on image to enlarge)



Colt's Foot half into it's blooming phase in sandy soil

(click on image to enlarge)



Skunk Cabbage emerging from the clay/silt substrate of Blind Creek Forest. Each leaf or spathe encloses an odd, ball-like flower called a spadix. A foraging animal has broken off one of the spathes, exposing the spadix.

(click on image to enlarge)



Kee (barely visible) examines a vernal pond by the base of an old willow -- near dusk

(click on image to enlarge)



Trail cam captures a buck and doe browsing in the Hole. Note buck has shed his antlers.