



REDDING NATURE EXPLORERS

MARCH ACTIVITIES & CHALLENGES

Mark Twain Library, New Pond Farm Education Center, and conservationist John McLeran continue to partner on exciting nature adventures for you and your family to enjoy. Since many of you have been taking advantage of our splendid open spaces, we have developed a series of activities to enhance your explorations in the natural world. This ongoing program is easy to follow and is designed to help you discover and appreciate our rich selection of local flora and fauna. While the program is geared for parents with children between the ages of four and nine, adults and children of all ages can take pleasure in these activities.



WOOD FROGS

This is THE perfect time to visit vernal pools and shallow marshes. If you hear a rapid series of, “Quack, Quack, Quack, Quack!” and don’t see any ducks, you may be listening to the mating calls of male wood frogs! These exquisite three-inch brown frogs can be identified by their dark brown “robber’s mask” and a light stripe on their upper lip. In the fall, wood frogs snuggle down under logs, rotting stumps, or leaf litter and prepare to go into a state of brumation (*). These remarkable creatures produce an antifreeze-like substance that protects their cells and allows their organs to shut down safely as they freeze during the winter months. Come spring, their cells warm up and all body functions begin anew. Wood frogs are the first amphibians to emerge in our area, they will head to these shallow bodies of water to breed, even when they are still partially covered with ice. One female wood frog can lay about 1,000 eggs in a cluster (she can lay up to 3,000 eggs!) Once the eggs emerge from her body, they expand with fluid and form a gelatinous mass, which is usually connected to a stick or piece of vegetation. Note: you can see individual eggs on the outside of the mass—very different from spotted salamander egg masses. *Please do not pick up the egg masses!*

Activities

- Learn more about brumation (*) for cold-blooded creatures vs hibernation for warm blooded creatures.
- If you are lucky enough to hear the “quacking”, watch for ripples on the water’s surface and you will find the frogs paddling around.
- By mid-April, start watching for these early tadpoles. If you find giant tadpoles at this time of year, they are from bullfrogs—these tadpoles have over-wintered and they can take up to three years to turn into adults.
- Explore your neighborhood for a vernal pool-it contains water for two months or more, occurs within a defined depression that lacks a permanent outlet stream, lacks any fish, and it dries out usually by late summer. They are special because there are a number of species that prosper in them. They are relatively common in Redding, Saugatuck Falls, and Limekiln Preserve both have a few.



**Grab your rubber boots
and flashlights!**

**It’s time to visit our wetlands and to
celebrate Amphibians on Parade!**



SPOTTED SALAMANDERS

With their glistening black skin and two rows of bright yellow-orange spots, these 6"-9" woodland salamanders emerge from their winter burrows at about the same time as the wood frogs. Sometimes, on rainy nights from mid-March to early April, there may even be a mass migration with hundreds of these beautiful amphibians scrambling over wet leaves and patches of melting snow making their way back to their ancestral breeding areas—the vernal pools and shallow marshes. It's amazing!! The larger females lay several clusters of about 100 gelatinous eggs—attaching each cluster to a stick or piece of vegetation so they don't float away. These egg masses are surrounded with an extra envelope of jelly, protecting the eggs from hungry aquatic insects, newts, wading birds, and other predators. Like the wood frogs, once the salamanders have laid their eggs, they head back up into the woodlands, where they are rarely seen. They spend their days hiding beneath rocks, rotting logs, and in burrows, venturing out for a few hours on moist nights in search of tasty insects, worms, and slugs.



Activities

- Discover why nearly all of our amphibians lay their eggs in water! (our red-backed salamanders are an exception—another fascinating story for you to discover!)
- Learn about ways you can protect our amphibians, read about their very fragile skin so that you will know how to (and not to) handle them. *It's always best to leave wild animals in the wild!*
- Spotted salamanders sometimes find their way into basements and window wells. You can give them a ride to safety by washing your hands well (their skin is ultra-sensitive to germs that might be on your hands), putting them into a clean moist container, and transporting them to a damp wooded area in your yard.



SPRING PEEPERS

In mid to late March these diminutive tree frogs emerge from their winter quarters beneath a log or pile of leaves and head for the nearest wetland, where they sing their familiar songs of love. The smaller males (3/4") are the songsters and arrive first. The bolder males select the most advantageous spots in the shallows and do their best to attract a larger (1.5") females (younger satellite males may be found singing from very impractical perches!) Unlike other frogs, female peepers lay their eggs one at a time on the underside of leaves and on other vegetation. If there ever was a sign of spring it is most assuredly that of a chorus of peepers singing their hearts out as you pass by a swamp in late afternoon. Because of their small size few people have ever seen one. Once the breeding season has come to an end, these tiny amphibians, with their suction cup toes, make their way back to the woodlands where they may be found hopping in the leaf litter or up in a tree where they dine on beetles, ants, flies—anything they can catch with their sticky tongues.

Activities

- Once you hear their song, you will most likely respond, "Oh yes, I know that one". If you are able to find a peeper, you will recognize it by a faint dark X on its back.
- Learn how peepers "Peep!"
- Read about fascinating frog feet: are they designed for swimming, climbing, digging?
- Note: the frog tadpoles and larval salamanders mentioned in this issue, all breathe through gills while they are developing in the water. Because vernal pools and shallow marshes often dry up by the end of summer, these animals need to go through their metamorphosis quickly, growing their four legs and developing lungs, so they will be equipped for life on land. Hopefully, timing is on their side and they will find their way to woodland homes where they will live until they return to "their" wetlands next spring.





SKUNK CABBAGES

Look for this wonderfully smelly plant in your neighborhood wetland. We think of it as appearing in spring, but if you look carefully you may see the tips emerging in November. By utilizing its internal heat-producing chemicals, a skunk cabbage's temperature can reach 50°-70° Fahrenheit, helping this plant to grow through the season, even when the air temperature is below freezing. The purplish hood is called a spathe and the stalk inside, which bears the actual flower, is called a spadix. Skunk cabbages are an early source of pollen for our honey bees. They are also visited by carrion beetles. These creatures "think" the flowers smell like rotting meat, so they fly in hoping for a meal, get pollen on their bodies, and transport it to the next skunk cabbage flower. You have to love their Latin name, *Symplocarpus foetidus*, which means "fetid flower".

Activities

- Look for skunk cabbage flowers in March. Look for the same plants after mid-April and see how they look with their large green leaves. While called cabbage it is not to be eaten because of its toxic calcium oxalate crystals. Our woodland Indians reportedly boiled and boiled the emerging leaves to remove the toxins before eating them.
- Often found growing next to skunk cabbage is a similar wetland native, False Hellebore, which is also toxic. Once you learn about the leaves, it is easy to tell them apart.
- The large leaves of these two plants provide shady patches in our wet woodlands. Sometimes these shady patches are enjoyed by woodland frogs!



**FALSE
HELLEBORE
LEAVES**



PUSSY WILLOW

Another sure harbinger of spring, pussy willows are found along wetland margins. Be aware that there are a number of willow species that grow in Redding, but only the pussy willow has the classic pussy toes.

Activities

- If you choose to cut some branches to bring home and put in a vase, you will note that the stems will begin to sprout roots. If you have any wetlands where you live, you can jab a hole in the earth, insert a willow branch and tamp down the earth around the branch. If the ground starts to dry out give the willows some water. With a little bit of luck, the shoots will start to sprout new leaves and you will now have a willow patch of your own. Certain caterpillars are especially fond of willows leaves.

**New Pond Farm members, please join us for our
annual Spring Peeper Patrols!
Check out our website for more information.**

To catchup on past activities, nature treasure hunts, stories and videos relating to Redding's plants and animals, please click [here](#).

To find out about New Pond Farm Education Center memberships, please click [here](#).

How It Works

Each month you will receive a list of hands-on activities to enjoy either around where you live or in one of our many open spaces. All the animals and plants have been carefully chosen because they are relatively common to our area and are more easily found in that month. We encourage you to guide your child/children to respond to what they see/hear/smell; they may wish to draw a picture of, write about, or take a photo of their discoveries. We would love to share their work on our social media sites: send to sarah@marktwainlibrary.org or info@newpondfarm.org

OR tag us on Facebook, Instagram @newpondfarm or @marktwainlibraryct, or on Twitter @newpondfarm or @mtlredding

Email any of your nature questions to:
askanaturalist@newpondfarm.org

The library will have a list of children's books that relate to the creatures featured each month.

Before You Go

Picking, picking up what you have found. In Town open spaces, all plants and animals are protected by Town ordinances so please enjoy things with your exploring eyes. Members of New Pond Farm Education Center are invited to explore their 102-acre property, following the same guidelines.

Poison Ivy: We advise you and your children to stay on the trails and to learn to recognize this common neighbor; "leaves of three let it be."

Ticks are out and about, but staying on the trails lowers your risk. Living in Fairfield County, we should all be doing regular tick checks at the end of each day.

Who else is out there? Yes, bears, bobcats, and coyotes are occasionally seen in Redding. There are no recorded interactions between these animals and people in Redding that have caused injury. Consider carrying whistles.

Masks: Please have masks with you, in case you encounter other explorers out on the trail.

What to Wear: Hats, long, light colored pants (easier to see ticks), and sneakers are okay. No need for boots unless you plan to veer off the trail into a swamp or stream.

What to Bring: Water, a basic first aid kit, bug spray (hopefully, the family friendly variety). If you plan to take advantage of Redding trails, we recommend borrowing or purchasing *The Book of Trails* from the Mark Twain Library. NPPEC members, please reach out to info@newpondfarm.org if you'd like a digital copy of our Trail Map.

Dear Parents — A Few Thoughts On How To Organize & Enrich Your Outdoor Experience

- Focus your child's attention at the start of your venture. Ask questions, suggest things to look at and listen for.
- A sense of joy and excitement on your part will set the tone. Children key off the attitude of their parents.
- Allow each discovery to unfold at your child's pace — this can be challenging, but worth the effort. Be ready to move on or discontinue an activity when your child has lost interest.
- No need for lots of facts, it's more important to express your feelings — "Wow, isn't that blue flower beautiful". Tease out your children's thoughts too.
- Be receptive to sounds and smells, allow time to pause quietly and to listen while on the trail.
- Bring along a note pad with a soft pencil. Encourage a drawing or a few reflections and observations. Not only will this enhance your child's observation skills, it may also generate a cherished keepsake, and broaden skills learned in school.
- Magnifying glasses are recommended for explorers of all ages. We suggest a 2.5-3 inch glass magnifier in a slipcase, these work well for small hands. Plastic can scratch quickly & glass usually has better resolution. 2-4 power works well. Consider buying 2, they tend to disappear. EBAY, Amazon both have a selection. Should not cost over \$5-9.

Resource Guide:

FOR KIDS (* - AVAILABLE AT MARK TWAIN LIBRARY)

National Audubon Society first field guide.

Insects / written by Christina Wilsdon*

A visual guide to the natural science of insects which includes information on the ten most common orders, pollination, and life-cycles; also works as a field guide.

National Audubon Society first field guide.

Wildflowers / Susan Hood.*

Forest explorer: a life-size field guide / Nic Bishop*

Depicts in detail several different deciduous forest habitats, with field notes about the insects and animals shown, as well as tips on how to explore a real forest.

Look up!: bird-watching in your own backyard /

Annette LeBlanc Cate.* A conversational, humorous introduction to bird-watching featuring quirky full-color illustrations portray dozens of birds chatting about their distinctive characteristics, including color, shape, plumage, and beak and foot types.

FOR ADULTS (* - AVAILABLE AT MARK TWAIN LIBRARY)

A field guide in color to insects / by Jirí Zahradník*

Trees / Allen J. Coombes ; photography by Matthew Ward.*

National Audubon Society the Sibley guide to birds / written and illustrated by David Sibley.*