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Cooks Current Newsletter

The View from Laughing Springs: Hans Reimann's ecological notes

Spring 2006

Habitat Stewardship

Spring greetings to everyone! As it is with my wife and me, perhaps the spring season is your favorite time of year to be a part of our watershed area. The gradual unfolding of the many layers of plant and animal life begin to weave a living tapestry of sight and sounds. From those quiet late March mornings of bluebird migration through shrub forest layer and meadow, spring blue and mourning cloak butterflies and male robins jockeying for territory, to the late May mornings of wood thrushes serenading the dawn light and orioles greeting the morning sun with their tree top symphony of sound and sight. From the stark shades of brown bark and dormant buds to the pastoral splendor of the greening forest landscape, spring brings the freshness of nature's renewal. To help keep and enhance the native biodiversity in our watershed area, the National Wildlife Federation has taught me to be a Habitat Steward with the following five steps as my guiding creed to pass on to all of you.

- 1) Grow native plants found in your area including trees, shrubs, and other plants that offer food such as pollen, nectar, nuts, cones, berries, and other seeds.
- 2) Provide water for wild life with a birdbath, small pond or shallow dish, or care for a natural spring or stream on or near your habitat.
- 3) Create protective cover for wildlife by growing a meadow, densely branched shrubs or (when appropriate) evergreens. Place hollow logs in your back yard.
- 4) Build birdhouses, attach them to metal poles and monitor their use. Grow host plants for butterfly and moth caterpillars to eat and provide dense native plants to create safe areas for nesting wildlife.
- 5) Be careful, watch what you plant in your garden. Exotic species not native to your region can become invasive and be harmful to both people and wildlife.

Vernal Pools

Another important spring habitat feature, that some of us enjoy on our properties, are vernal pools. These are seasonal pools, unique wetland habitats where some of our state's most recognizable reptiles and amphibians can be found. Vernal or seasonal pools are small, shallow wetlands that do not have a permanent inlet or outlet of water flow. They fill in the fall or spring when rain or snowmelt drains into shallow depressions. Seasonal pools hold water for only part of the year and

experience a drying phase usually in late summer. Because of this drying phase for part of the year, these wetland habitats are often overlooked when human activity encroaches on them with forestry, home building, and landscaping. Storm water run off from roads can adversely affect water quality.

Eighty-five percent of seasonal pool amphibians return each year to breed in their natal pond. This fidelity by individual amphibians to a particular pool is an important consideration for species conservation. Animals that require seasonal pool habitats to complete some phase of their life cycle are called seasonal pool obligates. Three common mole salamanders of Pennsylvania: the marble, the spotted, and the Jefferson are all seasonal pool obligate species. The wood frog, eastern spadefoot, and a crustacean – the springtime fair shrimp – are also seasonal pool obligates. Other animals that use seasonal pools, but also use permanent wetland habitats, are red spotted newts, northern spring peepers, American toads, and wood turtles. A seasonal pool registry is being compiled in our area by a partnership of the Nature Conservancy, the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy and the Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program.

For further information, contact: <http://www.paconservancy.org/rc/sp> or Western PA Conservancy c/o Seasonal Pool Project Coordinator, 209 4th Ave, Pittsburgh, PA 15222, phone number 412-586-2307 or email spcoordinator@paconserve.org.