

Notes from a Naturalist

Allison Byrd

Big night for small creatures

On April 11, as snow still lined many of the roads of Carroll County, the forecast was shaping up to be ideal for a “Big Night.”

The overnight temperature was predicted to be warmer than 40 degrees Fahrenheit, it had rained all day, and the precipitation was expected to continue throughout the night. Those are the perfect conditions for amphibians to emerge from their underground over-wintering locations and travel to their breeding pools. A “Big Night” is when a large number of amphibians undertake this breeding migration.

The trouble occurs when amphibians attempt to cross the road and are hit by automobiles. Volunteers can make a life-or-death difference by ferrying these small creatures safely across the road. It’s not often that a small act can make such a “big” impact, but this is truly one of those times.

Tin Mountain staff and volunteers ventured into the rainy darkness with flashlights, reflective vests, data-sheets and identification guides. We kept an ear out for traffic and an eye out for amphibians. When one was found, we made sure our hands were sufficiently wet (and free of any soaps, sanitizers or creams) and gently transported the amphibian across the road in the direction it was traveling.

At the three locations we monitored near Tin Mountain Conservation Center, we moved numerous spotted



Quill Saunders pauses for a photo before carrying an Ambystomid salamander to safety. (ALLISON BYRD PHOTO)

salamanders (*Ambystoma maculatum*), wood frogs (*Rana sylvatica*), spring peepers (*Pseudacris c. crucifer*), American toads (*Bufo a. americanus*), pickerel frogs (*Rana palustris*) and green frogs (*Rana clamitans melatona*). We also collected information on the amphibians that had already see **BIG NIGHT** page 23

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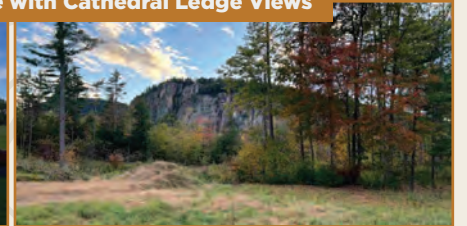


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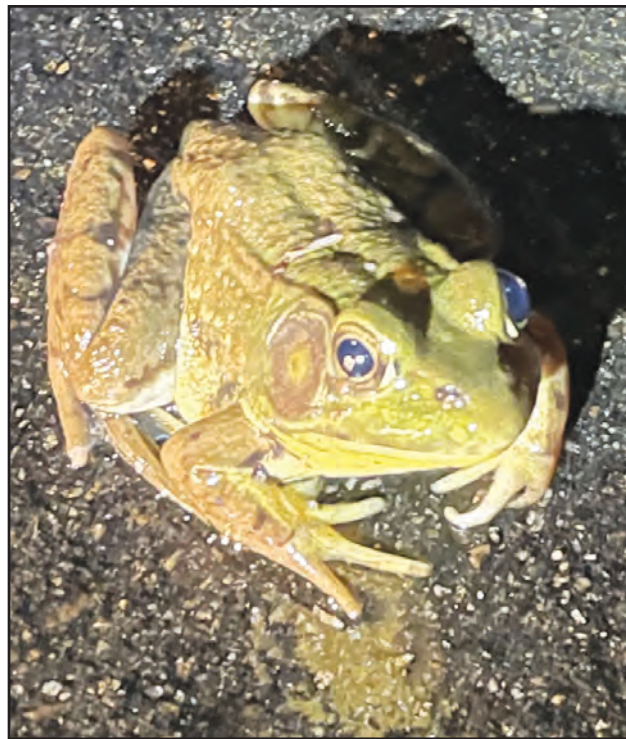
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LEFT: A spotted salamander about to cross the road. RIGHT: A green frog headed toward its breeding pool. (ALLISON BYRD PHOTOS)

BIG NIGHT from page 21

been hit by cars, which served as a somber reminder of the value of our efforts that night.

Awareness of amphibian movements on these early, warm, rainy spring nights is growing. In some locations, temporary nighttime road closures are implemented to allow high numbers of amphibians to cross without the threat of traffic. On many roads throughout the state, volunteers are helping to expedite crossings

(much like our group did).

For folks who have no interest walking the roads on a wet spring night, it is still possible to make a difference. Whenever feasible, plan to stay home on the evenings that are ideal for amphibian movement. Fewer cars on the roads mean more amphibians can cross safely.

Also, those who are interested in protecting these vulnerable populations can spread awareness simply by informing others about the timing of these short,

but critical, migrations.

In the coming days, be sure to stop and listen for the calls of frogs that have successfully made it to their breeding pools. You should be able to hear wood frogs, often described as sounding like a “flock of ducks” and spring peepers, aptly named because of their repetitive, high-pitched “peep” call.

Allison Byrd is a research manager at Tin Mountain Conservation Center.

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