The Conservancy Corner

More Discoveries at PV Park

By Dick Byers

Amateur herpetologists of the Westmoreland Bird & Nature Club gathered at Murrysville's Pleasant Valley Park to search for snakes and salamanders on Earth Day, April 22. Because of the unpredictable spring weather we had been having Jim Pemberton scheduled the survey for 1 PM in the afternoon in hopes the temperature would be warm enough to bring out the reptiles. This strategy backfired. Earth Day was unseasonably warm and by 1PM the temperature reached the mid-80's driving the reptiles back underground to avoid the heat. Jim wished he had started at 10 o'clock. The team of about eight people located only one species, a northern ringneck snake, that is a small common species that includes salamanders in its diet. Not even garter snakes were found, which we are sure are present. Another snake hunt will be necessary.

The salamander count was much more productive and five additional species were added to the list. I was most interested in how many they would find because most of the wooded areas in PV Park are very young and I wondered how quickly salamanders could move into the habitat. Salamanders have also become very important in recent years as potential bio-indicators of the diversity and health of the forest. I was amazed to read last year that the biomass of salamanders in a New England forest was twice that of the resident breeding birds. In the southern Appalachians the salamander biomass per acre was found to be equal to or larger than the biomass of all the vertebrates combined. That means that the total weight of all the salamanders per acre outweighs all the birds, mammals and reptiles per acre of the forest habitat. Pennsylvania, being halfway between New England and the southern Appalachians probably has a salamander biomass somewhere between those figures. That makes salamanders far more important than I ever realized. They are now considered sensitive indicators of ecosystem integrity since they provide an energy pathway from the leaf litter organisms to the larger terrestrial animals of the forest. A high salamander count is now indicative of a healthy forest ecosystem.

There are 148 species of salamanders in the United States. Twenty-three are native to the northeastern states and Pennsylvania has 22 of them. The southeastern states represent the salamander capitol of the world with over 50 species in North Carolina alone.

The five species found by the WBNC Earth day team in PV Park included the red-spotted newt, dusky, mountain dusky, two-lined and northern two-lined salamander. In addition, they found the egg masses of the spotted salamander. To date eleven amphibian species have been found in the park and more probably await discovery.

The park's spring wildflower bloom has not been spectacular due to the two false starts of the spring season this year, but a section of the park was covered with spring beauties and cutleaf toothwort. One person was surprised that no trilliums were found, but I think there hasn't been enough time for this species to become established in so young a wood. Trillium requires up to 17 years of growth before it can bloom and then it is subject to deer herbivory.

I found a small dark flying insect with orange and white spots on the wings that I thought was a butterfly, but I knew of none that fit that description. Tom Pearson brought his net and caught it. It turned out to be a beautiful daytime flying moth called the grapevine epimenis. As its name implies, the caterpillar feeds on wild grapes. It rolls the leaf up by tying it with silk and feeds inside the shelter. It over-winters in soft woods in the pupae stage and emerges in early spring. It is quite a beautiful insect and another gem in this well used diversified park.

The next public outing by the WBNC in PV Park will take place on June 1 at 7:30 AM. Club president Tony Pegnato will be looking for songbirds, particularly breeding warblers. Bring binoculars and meet in the parking lot.

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