

Vernal ponds teeming with aquatic life

By MIKE CHMIELECKI
Times staff

One evening in late 1993, Ruth Kuykendall — decked out in heels, a blazer and a dress — aimed the beam of her flashlight into a pond, looking for salamanders.

She had just taken the train from Boston back to Manchester after a day of work at the Massachusetts Bay National Estuary Program. Her method of unwinding was to drive to the side of the road, take out her flashlight, and hike through the woods to peer into ponds.

"I've been into this a long time, with my handy dandy flashlight in the car," she says. "It's just an interest I've had."

But instead of salamanders, that night she saw other flashlights in the woods. As she waited, the flashlights came closer.

Rick Roth, director of the Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team, and several other team members walked through the clearing.

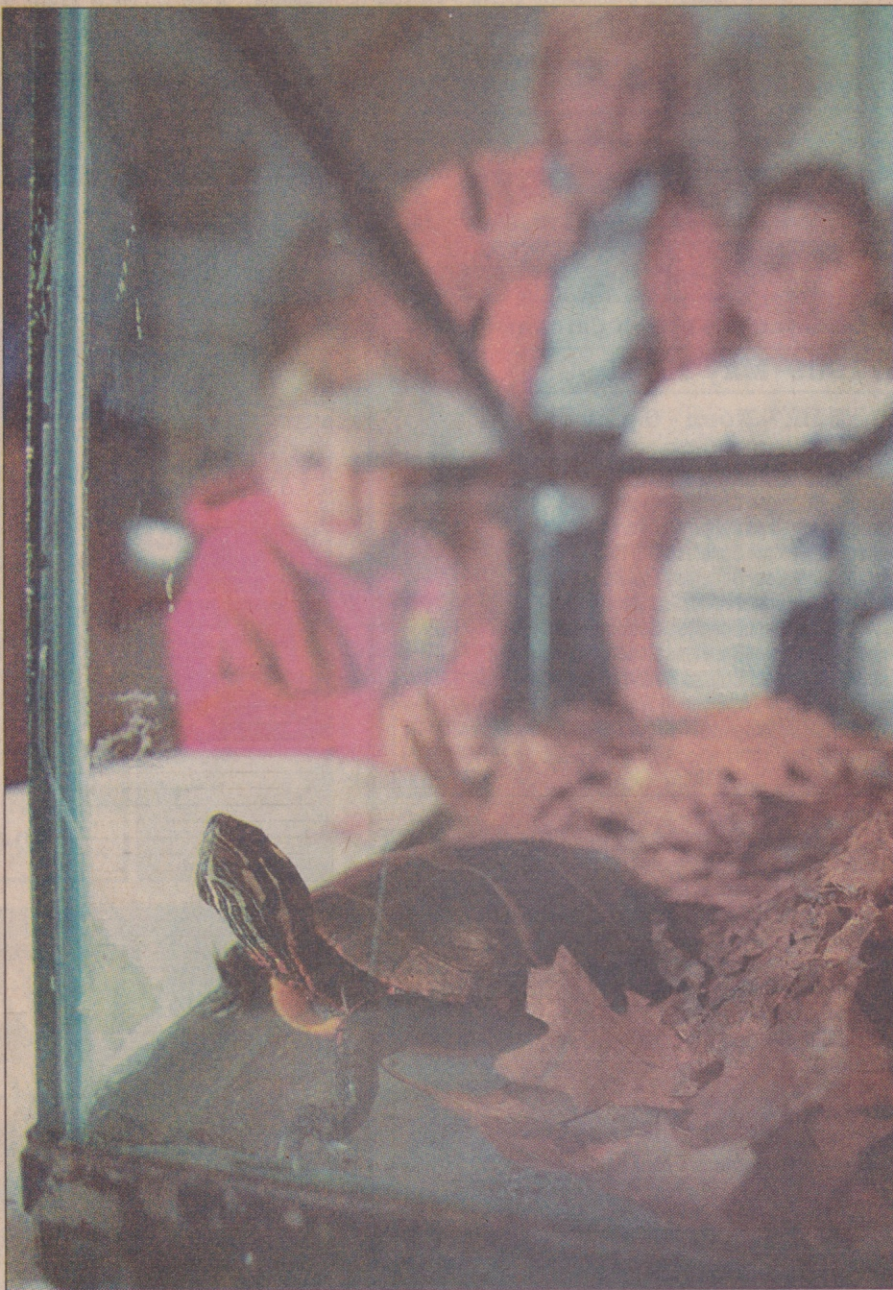
"Rick took one look at me and asked what I was doing here," Kuykendall says, smiling.

Roth explains that many of the team's 10 members met each other out in the field. The team is usually so busy, in fact, that it rarely meets as a group.

By definition, a vernal pond is a shallow depression in the ground that is full of snowmelt and rain by spring, dry by summer. Many animals, such as the fairy shrimp and spotted salamander, depend on this unique, fishless habitat for survival.

The ponds also provide food for red foxes, raccoons, birds, snakes, frogs, turtles and other animals.

The group started in 1990 as a conservation project between the New England Wildlife Center in Hingham and the New England Herpetological Society, of which Roth is a member, along with Margaret Flowers and Jim Chick.



Josh Reynolds photo

A painted turtle stares from its terrarium at a Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team exhibition at the Rockport Public Library last Saturday.



Mike Chimielecki photo

From left, members of the Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team: Margaret Flowers, Barbara Buls, Jim Chick, Peter Willett, Ruth Kuykendall, Director Rick Roth, Ileen Graham and H.A. Lind. (Not pictured are Alex Eisenzopf and Treasurer Jayn Gardner-Crowley.)

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As Roth recalls it, that project "didn't realize what it hoped to do," because everyone was off doing their own thing instead of working together.

"But it was a starting place for some interest in vernal ponds, and we took it from there," Roth says.

Through meeting people in the field and word of mouth, the Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team was born.

One of the team's main goals is to certify each of Cape Ann's more than 200 vernal ponds. Certification protects the ponds as wetlands, but the application process is complex. It requires measurements, maps and proof of vernal pond activity, which means additional photographs, notes and possibly sound recordings, though that's rare.

"All wildlife has an intrinsic value; it doesn't need to have an important use for anyone," Roth explains.

The team, in its nine years of existence, has gotten about 20 ponds certified by the state's Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program, with 40 other ponds in various stages of completion.

Since the team is made up completely of volunteers, it has depended on grants from Toad Hall Bookstore, the Gloucester Cultural Council and private donations.

"It would be nice to certify all of these ponds," Roth says, "but we need more volunteers."

Team member Margaret Flows calls vernal ponds "a hotbed of animal life."

"They're always churning with so much energy," she says. "They're centers. They usually have more life than the areas right next to them."

Team member Peter Willett equates the pond to a cafeteria, a place of diversity with "a variety of foodstuffs."

"Say a dragonfly larva eats a tadpole, which is then eaten by a Baltimore oriole. ...

You could say the energy is dissipated up and down the Eastern seaboard," Willett says.

Team member H.A. Lind nods.

"It's not just Cape Ann that benefits," she says.

Barbara Buls, also on the team, explains that vernal ponds are good indicators of the health of the surrounding environment.

"The pond is a mix of invertebrate species and amphibians, which are incredibly fragile creatures," she says. "Amphibians absorb everything through their skin."

The team's other major goal is educating Cape Ann about its vernal ponds. Members show up at the Earth Day fairs to exhibit fairy shrimp, salamanders and other pond inhabitants. The team offers several field trips. Last Saturday, Willett, along with the rest of the team, gave a presentation on vernal ponds at the Rockport Public Library.

The team even has its own webpage (www1.shore.net/~nya/CAVernalPond.html), and is currently working on a 15-minute video. They also created a poster, which is on display at Halibut Point State Park.

Jim Chick, a truck driver, explains his fascination with vernal ponds through an event he saw during the spring.

"It was a salamander stampede," Chick says. "There were all these salamanders going to the ponds; I was almost stepping on them. The leaves were wet, and there were so many you could hear them walking. They were six to nine inches long."

Chick's occupation is not an unusual one for a team member. Roth himself is a carpenter. Others are graphics artists, web page designers, or members of television production teams.

Roth stresses that the group is not composed of scientists "taking 50 million controlled experiments," but people who simply want to see the ponds preserved and cherished.

Lind puts it simply enough.

"It's a good time, and we care," she says.