

Backyard nature: spring is a cruel season

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REGION — The amphibian lives that bound into Maine's watersheds every spring may be of marginal size but they are a mighty colony with common goals – to go forth and multiply.



An errant yellow-spotted salamander during spring mating season. *Nicole Carter / Advertiser Democrat*

During my months-long long sheltering-at-home our backyard pond where snow melt and rainfall gathers (before continuing their flows to the Androscoggin River and eventually Casco Bay) became a playground of sorts for me. Every morning and every night it seemed that something new was going on in the water.

Amphibian society follows routine rituals, not just week to week but around the clock. The cycles vary from animal to animal but are incredibly precise, allowing them all not only the opportunity to breed the next generation but to snack on each other as they all go about the business of life.

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It started before the snow melted and even the late storms bringing up to a foot of fresh snow did nothing more than delay the process a day or two. All sorts of gelatin egg clusters lined the edge of the pond. An amateur herpetologist could probably tell you which eggs came from which species pretty easily, but I am just a novice in my first season of dedicated observance. I only know they came from salamanders a few inches long to the yellow-spotted giants (relatively speaking of course) and all sorts of frog species.

The speed with which the carpets of eggs appeared in the water, affixed to last year's reeds and each other was astonishing. That and the quantities of them, spreading across the surface and down to the depths. I came to see the pond not as a really deep puddle of leaves and muck but an incubator for thousands upon thousands of creatures.

The race for survival starts even as the larvae develop into tadpoles within the egg clusters, feeding other oversexed and ravenous species. Do frogs and salamanders dine on each other's eggs? Can they discern their own from other species? Do they care? Why do some people call the larvae polliwogs while others call them tadpoles? Quarantining with my pond has launched so many minute mysteries for me. These slimy little enigmas power a whole ecosystem; do they know how important they are?



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Eventually the eggs began hatching. I would stand at the edge of the pond and watch as the water literally bubbled. Tiny black tadpoles and long, grayish-colored polliwogs (and really, is there a difference?). They would squiggle to the surface for a breath of air and dart back to the depths before some predator (or contemporary) made a meal of them. They would bite each other – were they playing as youngsters will or were they hunting?

I learned this spring that many frogs and salamanders migrate in and out of the pond as their breeding cycles played out. Some are more or less permanent residents, like smaller brownish salamanders and the green and bull frogs. Some do not seem very smart. The big, yellow-spotted salamander? Dummies.

They would sit at the bottom of the pond lethargically and we could easily identify them at night with their bright yellow spots. But we would also find them in the morning lurking in our workshop, which is well uphill of the pond. What would make a salamander mistake a dry, heated building with concrete floor for a breeding pond? According to Wikipedia, spotted salamanders can live more than 20 years – but having found a few dead ones, withered up and dried out in the corner underneath a workbench – I question whether they have the brains for that kind of longevity.

While exploring one night I came across a yellow-spotted salamander inside a rotted stump at the edge of the pond. Its tail was coated with thick, gummy-looking slime. A large garter snake retreated backwards down the outside of the stump, sort of shaking its head and doing a snake-version of a cough as it slipped into the water. I had interrupted a life-and-death struggle for the salamander and a hearty meal for the snake.



This yellow-spotted salamander narrowly, and temporarily, escaped the jaws of a garter snake. *Nicole Carter / Advertiser Democrat*

I poked at the salamander with a long stem, encouraging it to go find a safer place. It wouldn't move; it was either in shock or maybe stunned by the anesthetic from the snake's saliva. I checked a few times that evening and while the salamander never moved, neither did I see the snake return.

The next morning the salamander was gone from the stump, and the morning after that I spotted a familiar looking garter snake lazing nearby, its midsection swollen with digesting prey. I felt bad for the salamander, but also respect for the snake, which I hypothesized did not let a pesky human with a flashlight stop it from snagging the meal of the season.



A garter snake, lazily digesting a spring meal from the pond. *Nicole Carter / Advertiser Democrat*



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That epic event occurred in mid-May, about the time that yellow-spotted salamanders wrap up their breeding activities and migrate to their woodland summer habitats. So I hypothesize, again, that at least that unfortunate amphibian had the opportunity to complete its job for the year before feeding its neighbor. Doing its part to power the ecosystem.

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