

Frogs and friends crossing road safely

By GAEN MURPHREE

MONKTON — Two tunnels built under Monkton Road in Monkton last fall to give frogs, salamanders and other small creatures safe passage across the increasingly busy road are living up to expectations, according to early reports from amphibian experts.

“I am thrilled to report that based on our preliminary data gathered during the first significant amphibian movement of this year, the underpasses are working beautifully,” said Vermont amphibian expert Jim Andrews of Salisbury. “A steady stream of amphibians passed through both underpasses last Thursday night and were captured on camera.

Andrews reported that between 9 p.m. and 7 a.m. one night in March 172 frogs (mostly wood frogs) and 152 mole salamanders (mostly blue-spotted and their hybrids) safely crossed through the two tunnels, which were built after a 10-year effort with \$346,957 raised by volunteers.

The tunnels link the amphibians’ habitat on the west-facing slopes of Hogback Mountain with their spring breeding grounds in the Huizenga Swamp. The efforts to raise the funds and build the tunnels have been led by Andrews, Monkton residents Steve Parren and Chris Slesar, and a consortium of neighbors and community groups including the Monkton Conservation Commission and the Lewis Creek Association.

Groundbreaking on the tunnels began in last August and was concluded and inspected by November.

REPORT FROM THE FIELD



THIS IS ONE of two tunnels that allows amphibians to pass under Monkton Road unharmed during the spring and fall migration seasons. Before the tunnels were built, thousands of amphibian risked death each night crossing from the forest to the swamp.

Photo courtesy of Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department

Standing in the dark, in the cold mist, flashlight in hand on the Monkton-Vergennes Road, the contrast is striking.

Where the newly installed wildlife tunnels funnel amphibians safely under the road into the swamp, the road is almost entirely clear.

Elsewhere on this road that routinely carries up to 1,800 cars per day it’s a scene of carnage, like something out of a Civil War movie when the camera pans the battlefield in the tragic aftermath. Squished frogs and salamanders line the road. Many are so smashed they are almost unrecognizable.

Mortality — before the installation of the wildlife

tunnels — had been estimated at 50 percent, which over time, said Andrews could lead to these species’ disappearance in this area.

The night I assisted Parren and a small handful of volunteers in counting peepers, wood frogs, yellow-spotted salamanders, blue-spotted salamanders, and newts — dead and alive — and helping live amphibians cross the road, the tally for our two and a half hours of work came to 267 amphibians in the control and buffer areas. This number suggests that some portion of that total have also made it safely through the tunnels and into the breeding pools.

For Parren, who is also manager of the Wildlife Diversity Program (which covers all non-game species) at the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department, monitoring and saving amphibians on Monkton Road has been a 20-year labor of love.

Parren said he was first alerted



A BLUE-SPOTTED SALAMANDER stops for for a nature paprazzo before continuing through one of the two new amphibian tunnels under Monkton Road from its winter home in a forest to its summer residence in a swamp.

Photo courtesy of Kiley Briggs

to the importance of the Huizenga Swamp crossing by Andrews, considered by many the state’s top amphibian expert. Since 1997, Parren has been coming to the Monkton Road crossing, tallying animals dead and alive, and carrying live amphibians across the road.

“I’ve been out there when I could hear the animals moving through the forest. I could hear the wood frogs jumping down from the higher spots. I’ve been out there when it’s been raining so hard that there’s actually standing water on the road and the salamanders literally swim across the road. It’s incredible. You’re kind of awestruck,” said Parren. “Then when you do the math and after two nights I calculated that over 1,000 animals had been left on the road that was kind of sobering.”

Parren said he’s brought in a small crew of volunteers over the years to help. And then about 10 years ago he and neighbor and fellow state employee Chris Slesar, who is an environmental specialist for VTrans

and an expert on how transportation can be better adapted to wildlife, began cooking up the idea for the two tunnels.

Ever the scientist, Parren is pleased with how well the tunnels are working, but wants to track the data fully over this year’s migration before quantifying the tunnel’s success. He is also actively analyzing ways to tweak the “interceptors” placed strategically at different points along the exterior of the tunnels that help redirect animals who’ve made a wrong turn.

“Right now almost no animals are passing over the road surface where the tunnels have walls on both sides,” said Parren in an email to the *Independent*. “I believe we are having success but am trying to tease out the impacts of some animals spilling out the ends of the walls and not going through the tunnel.”

At the southwest end of one tunnel, the night I observe, there was a steady stream of amphibians marching up to the tunnel entrance and a

clump caught in a sort of amphibian “roundabout,” designed to redirect critters away from the road and back up the hill and into the tunnel.

Parren wants to improve these interceptors to save as many animals as possible.

Amphibians migrate on wet nights, he said, as the ground thaws and the temperatures move above freezing.

This community’s efforts represent one small but important step to address that imbalance.

Asked what’s brought him out for two decades of cold rainy nights, Parren replied, “Reverence for life.”

“Here’s a whole community of amphibian species that are dependent on this little patch of Vermont,” Parren continued, “and it worked for thousands of years. They’ve probably been going down to that pool for that long from the hillside. And now we’ve got a paved road with lots of traffic and it’s not working so well for them.”

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