

Conservation Matters

A monthly column focused on conservation education, as the result of collaboration among several area conservation commissions and organizations. If your town's commission or conservation organization would like to contribute articles, please contact Jessica Tabolt Halm jess_tabolt@hotmail.com

Title: The Ecology of Campton Pond

Written by: Don Buso, Ecologist and friend of Campton Conservation Commission

Campton's only stoplight affords passersby with a view of Campton Pond's shallow basin in the foreground above the dam, the wetlands behind, rising riparian shrubs grading out to mature forest, and a mountain background –that's a million-dollar view –made even prettier by the Garden Club's seasonal plantings along the wing-walls of the dam.

The energy generated as the Mad River drops from Waterville is dissipated in the flat section represented by the pond and the upstream braided channel. This results in a complex area of swept-in woody debris, mixed with rock, gravel and sand, and interwoven with vegetation that can handle living in this dynamic debris field.

The sand bars just above the pond carry the tracks of moose, deer, fox, coyote, beaver, otter and bear. The wetlands at the head of the pond often have several pairs of waterfowl, especially during spring or fall migration. From Rte 49, when the traffic allows, one can see black ducks or mallards in the shallows, along with mergansers, and occasional wood ducks. At some point each year, a great blue heron arrives to feast on the many frogs. The wood frogs quack first each spring, then the peepers at night, then the toads trill, and the green frogs twang, followed by the grey tree frogs whistling on warm summer nights.

Depending on this ecosystem is an animal that no one ever hears, and only a few ever see. The wood turtle, so-named for its shell that resembles carved wood, is one of my favorite animals. One of the healthiest populations in NH of this rare reptile, technically a species of concern, is found in Campton Pond. In several seasons of State-licensed surveys, I have found up to 15 separate adults and a few young turtles –that's a thriving colony by today's standards. There are the usual other turtles found in most NH wetlands: abundant Eastern painted turtles and mature common snapping turtles.

What makes the system uniquely suited for wood turtles is the mixture of large and small debris, dense riparian vegetation and the surrounding flooded woodlands. Wood turtles patrol the stream banks looking for slugs, worms, tadpoles, crayfish and any wild berries in season. They are designed to wander over hundreds of acres in a systematic and habitual way, and the Campton Pond area is the perfect place for that behavior. A USFS researcher radio-tagged about 10 adult turtles in Campton Pond several years ago. One walked about a half-mile up the Mad River to Goose Hollow campground during the summer, and then came back in the fall. Another traveled a similar distance to Upper Mad River Road.

The biggest danger to these turtles is crossing Rte 49 –they tend to wander mostly at night, but we have found few road kills, thankfully.

Wood turtles use the deep, cut-away stream banks of Campton Pond for hibernation, looking for bank beaver holes or tree root wads to burrow into for the winter. We don't know how they survive the catastrophic floods and winter thaws with high flows and bank erosion –but they do! They bury about 6 to 10 eggs on the sandy banks in late June, which hatch around early September. Nests are also wiped out by mid-summer floods –sometimes buried in new sand or washed totally away.

Changes in Campton Pond come with every hydrologic 'event', some gentle, some outrageously powerful, such as Hurricane Irene, which re-routed several stream channels. As a holding point for water behind the mill dam, the Pond has often been considered for dredging to increase depth and volume, particularly for improving trout fishing. The history of the site actually includes a bathing beach (pre-WWII) at the upper end of the pond where the sand is freshly resorted each spring.

All things considered, Campton Pond in its current wild state is a priceless resource that contributes important functions beyond the dollar return for the recreation it offers or even the beautiful seasonal vistas. Being able to observe and experience healthy wetlands, and all the biota that lives there, is a value that no person alone could purchase. We are fortunate to have Campton Pond to visit and learn about.