

Seasonal Migration Isn't Just "For the Birds"

by: Steve Whitman, Alexandria Conservation Commission



Photo credit: Turtle Rescue League

Spring is almost here; soon flowers will begin to poke their heads up through the recently thawed ground; the trees and shrubs will bud and soon burst forth into full foliage. Animals will be emerging from their winter dens, and others preparing to begin their journey from their overwinter habitat to their mating territories to reproduce and raise their young. We all know that many species of birds migrate to different habitats over the winter months, but many people don't realize that many mammals, reptiles and amphibians do the same. For these creatures, spring and fall are an especially dangerous time of year.

Exactly how animals navigate migratory routes has long been one of the great mysteries of science. It is believed that some use magnetic fields generated by the earth, some may use light waves or patterns, and others navigate using characteristics of the land such as mountain ranges or bodies of water. Whatever the method, most migratory routes other than for birds often require wildlife to venture into fragmented land [land which is broken up by development or roads] that make it necessary for the animals to leave the protective cover and relative safety of the fields or forest. Highways and roads pose the greatest threat, especially to the slower moving amphibians, turtles, and snakes. In the case of amphibians, motorists often don't see them [especially at night], turtles and snakes, unfortunately, are sometimes targeted as they attempt to cross the road. Larger animals are also at risk; however, because of their size and relative speed and agility, motorists are often able to avoid them or the animal is able to escape. As drivers, we need to be aware of migratory routes and areas of wildlife activity, and exercise care when driving in these areas, especially during the migration season [both spring and fall]. If you see a "critter" crossing the road, help them out if you can do so without placing yourself in danger; avoid hitting them with your car; and when possible, pull safely off the road and assist in the crossing. Note: always place or direct "the critter" to the side of the road to which it was headed, as its natural instincts will force it to try to cross again.

Unfragmented segments of land are important for the protection and support of our wildlife. In our area, we have a wide variety of wildlife, some seasonal, others full-time inhabitants. Some species migrate only a few miles between habitats, while others journey long distances. In the Lakes Region, we are fortunate to have many acres of unfragmented land, which allow wildlife to move uninhibited and safely between multiple habitats. Residents need to continue working with their towns and the state to conserve unfragmented land through encouraging the

designation of undeveloped land as “Town forests” or “State Parks”, educating and helping interested property owners enact conservation easements, and working with Planning Boards to incorporate greenways that provide safe passage corridors for wildlife when developing land.

We all have the privilege of living in a rural area and if we are to protect its character, we need to proactively manage and protect our resources including the land as well as the wildlife that inhabit the area. For information about how you can become actively involved, contact the Conservation Commission in your town or visit the New Hampshire Conservation Commission website at: <http://www.nhacc.org>.