

Caesar Creek State Park

Home of the Spotted Salamander

By Rick Hoffman, Ohio Certified Naturalist, President of the Nature Center Association of Caesar Creek.

One of the unique events that occur every spring at Caesar Creek State Park once the weather conditions are correct, is the mating ritual of the spotted salamander. Salamanders are amphibians. All amphibians are cold-blooded with a soft, moist skin that can absorb oxygen into their bodies. Most of them prefer to come out at night. Their young go through metamorphosis - a larval stage before becoming an adult. This stage is usually aquatic. They all lay their eggs in water.

The amphibians in the Ohio include: hellbenders, mudpuppies, newts, salamanders, toads and frogs. To the untrained human eye, all their eggs when laid in the water look like clusters of little gelatinous bubbles with black dots in them. However, not all of these forms of wildlife live in the water all the time, some just need what are called vernal pools to lay their eggs.

I discovered this very fact where I live in Sugarcreek Township. My home is in a wooded area and after a very heavy week of warm rain one spring, I opened my garage door to discover that the floor was covered with dusky salamanders on the wet pavement! This salamander is very thin and can be 2-½ to 4-½ inches long. So, I researched their habitat and learned that like all of the salamanders, they require a vernal pool to lay their eggs and hatch their young.

Vernal pools are small pools of water that form in the warm spring rains, usually in the woodland's areas. During the night, the adult

salamanders come out to mate when the conditions are right. Once the eggs are laid in the water, the adults disappear back into their habitats. After the larva develop, the young hatch. The pool then dries up and disappears until the next spring rains.

Fast forward to Caesar Creek State Park which is blessed with two areas where vernal pools form and where the spotted salamander lives. They live in hardwood forests and swamps where they can burrow near water and are rarely seen except during the breeding season. They are beautiful, glossy, black, 6-7-inch specimens with two rows of irregularly spaced greenish-yellow spots down their backs and occasionally orange spots on their heads. They are so shiny that they look like they're made of plastic.



The female lays clutches of up to two hundred eggs in shallow pools often associated with algae. There seems to be a symbiotic relationship where the algae provide oxygen for the growing embryos. The eggs hatch within four to eight weeks. Adult spotted salamanders can live up to twenty years.

The Army Corps of Engineer Rangers along with the Park Naturalist start checking the weather conditions and looking for the vernal pools to form every spring. It's not always during the same month every year, because it depends on the amount of water and the temperature of the ground. These professionals limit the number of visitors on each of the night visits because there are so many salamanders that the ground is literally crawling with them and you have to be very careful not to step on any of during this important once a year event.

This year (2019) they have selected the following possible dates: February 8, March 1 and March 8. You need to check either the Army Corps of Engineers website or the website of the Nature Center Association of Caesar Creek which is caesarcreekstatepark.com to find out the correct date and to register for the night hike to see them. All the hikes are at 8 p.m. Now here's a real reason to welcome in the spring weather. See you on the night hike! ■