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HERP HUNTING IS GREAT FAMILY
FUN, AN EXCITING WAY TO
CONNECT WITH NATURE
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Adult spotted newts (left) can often be found in local ponds and wetlands. Listen for the rapid trill of the grey tree frog (above) on warm spring nights.

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by Allison Briggaman

In the dark of the night, a hunter stalks along the edge of the marsh, flashlight in hand, his son and daughter following closely behind him. Their rubber boots squish softly as each step sinks into the soggy ground, but no one says a word. The spring air is warm, and small patches of snow still cling to the base of the undergrowth, a reminder of the long winter just passed.



Then a voice rings out into the night air, and they all freeze, their attention focused in the direction of the sound. “There!” shouts Owen, and, with one swift swing of his arm, he scoops a wood frog into his net and gently places it in a bucket with some water. Quickly, his sister Carley and his father crowd to his side and peer into the bucket to admire the catch of the night before releasing it gently back into the marsh.

Hunting. The word brings images to mind of men clad in camouflage, gun slung over one shoulder, walking slowly through the woods in search of a big buck deer. Whether you are in search of big game or small, though, it is the thrill of adventure that lures hunters back to the field each season.

Where does the term “herp hunter” come from? “Herp” is short for herpetology, which is the study of reptiles and amphibians. A “herpetologist” specializes in reptiles and amphibians. Thus, “herp hunters” are those who spend their time searching for reptiles and amphibians in the wild.

“Herp hunting can be as simple as looking under rocks and logs in your back yard for frogs, snakes and salamanders, or much more involved – doing surveys and reporting observations of species and vernal pools,” said Mike Marchand, a biologist for the Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Program. “One of the great things about herp hunting is that you can find reptiles and amphibians almost anywhere!”

BE A BACK YARD SCIENTIST

Just as deer hunters devote spring and summer to scouting areas where they might find their prize come deer season, herp hunters spend the winter months planning and scouting areas where they might find new or rare species in the spring.

“My son Owen and I started herp hunting when he



A tiny spring peeper (above) calls for a mate on a wet spring evening. Ringneck snakes (below) are docile and almost never bite. Hold gently.



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was four years old,” said John Kanter, Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Program Coordinator at New Hampshire Fish and Game. “I always made sure I had places to go planned out in advance. I would scout as I drove along, looking for wet areas that weren’t too far off the road and had good places to park nearby.”

Herp hunting is an easy, inexpensive way for adults to get kids outside and connect directly with nature. “Reptiles and amphibians are critters that are really accessible and that kids can see up close and handle carefully,” said Kanter. “Whereas adults might enjoy bird watching, that tends to be too abstract for kids, and looking through binoculars can be difficult, especially for younger children.”

A fun way to teach kids about frogs, in particular, is by listening to their calls. Children, with some help from adults, can learn to distinguish the sounds different species make by visiting the Frogs of New Hampshire page on the Fish and Game website at www.wildnh.com/Wildlife/Nongame/frogs.htm. Then, after dusk, when many species begin calling, go outside and listen to see how many you can identify.

Try visiting different areas, such as your back yard, a pond, a wetland and a vernal pool, and compare which species you hear in different habitats. The Fish and Game website also has pages that can help you identify snakes, turtles and amphibians you might see in New Hampshire.

Kids can use their hi-tech gadgets on a herp hunt, too. Let’s face it, we’ll never be able to take away the technology that kids and teens have today, but we can teach them how to integrate their technical world with the natural world. Have them put those camera phones and digital cameras to use! Encourage kids to take pictures of reptiles and amphibians they find; they can then use the photos to create their own website documenting the different species encountered, with date and locations. Those iPods can be useful too – download the frog calls and take them in the field for a quick and easy reference.

No matter what your age, you can help Fish and Game track reptile and amphibian species throughout the state through the

The Blanding’s turtle is a high conservation priority. Report observations to Fish and Game, but leave undisturbed.



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Go for a walk after a warm spring rain and you’re likely to find the vibrant orange-clad spotted newt in its terrestrial red-eft stage.



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Herps at Risk

Biologists in Fish and Game’s Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Program have conducted many surveys for reptiles and amphibian species in the state, including Blanding’s turtles, which are a species of special concern in New Hampshire. However, since the development of the New Hampshire Wildlife Action Plan, Fish and Game has been moving forward with surveys for additional species that were identified as the highest priority or at greatest risk in the state. Surveys for Blanding’s turtles will continue while these new efforts get underway.

One study with the University of New Hampshire is looking at habitat use and requirements of Eastern hognose snakes, a threatened species in New Hampshire. New efforts to find the rare, state-endangered marbled salamander began last year and will continue this spring. Determining the distribution of marbled salamanders is one of the highest priorities listed in the N.H. Wildlife Action Plan. Biologists are focusing their efforts in areas where marbled salamanders have historically occurred, such as Hollis, Brookline and Milford.

In addition to identifying over 100 species in greatest need of conservation in the state, New Hampshire’s Wildlife Action Plan also identified critical habitats that are vital to many species’ survival, including vernal pools. Many species of frogs and salamanders rely on vernal pools for breeding. These temporary bodies of water are free from larger predators such as fish and provide safe places for many amphibians to reproduce and lay their eggs. “The more people are aware of vernal pools and the habitats that surround them, the more they will understand the value of a piece of land,” said John Kanter Nongame and Endangered Wildlife program coordinator.



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Herps are sensitive; always handle gently. Owen Kanter (above) holds a tree frog on a rainy night. Carley Kanter (below) displays a colorful milk snake.



volunteer program called RAARP (Reptile and Amphibian Reporting Program). Volunteers submit reports and pictures of species they find, including where they saw them and when. Observations submitted by volunteers are used to determine the distribution of all reptiles and amphibians throughout the state. Reports of rare, threatened or endangered species are especially important to help protect them. If biologists know where these species have been observed, they can focus conservation efforts on those areas. You can find RAARP reporting forms, photography techniques and more at www.wildnh.com.

HANDLING HERPS

Herp hunting can be lots of fun and a great way to connect with nature, but there are a few important things to know before heading out to your favorite wetland. In most cases, animals will need to be held, briefly, for observation and photographs. Keep in mind that most amphibians absorb oxygen through their moist skin and can dry out quickly! Keep your hands wet, or use a handful of moist leaf litter when handling these

delicate creatures. Never touch them if your hands are covered in lotion or insect repellents. It is always a good idea to wash your hands before and after handling any reptile or amphibian.

While it is generally safe to handle most species of reptiles and amphibians, it goes without saying that some species, such as snapping turtles, are best viewed from a distance.

When approaching herps, most are likely to see you long before you see them. Many can also sense vibrations in the ground as you walk. Therefore, you should walk slowly, visually scan the area often, and listen carefully. If you startle a nearby turtle or frog, simply wait a few minutes for it to resurface and keep an eye out for others that are likely to be in the area.

Another thing to keep in mind is that there are new laws in effect regarding native reptiles and amphibians in New Hampshire. While it is legal to have some species of reptiles and amphibians in your possession, it is against the law to possess other species; for some, it depends on the time of year, such as during breeding seasons.

Most importantly, always remember to keep wild species wild. It is exciting to find species in their natural environment and that is the best place for them. Be sure to release animals where you found them to ensure their survival – and opportunities for future herp hunters to enjoy the thrill of the hunt!

For more information about reptiles and amphibians of New Hampshire, tips and techniques for herp hunting, the Reptile and Amphibian Reporting Program or the state laws and regulations pertaining to reptiles and amphibians in New Hampshire, visit www.wildnh.com.



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What to bring on a herp hunt:

- Rubber boots or hip waders
- Flashlight
- Dip net
- Small clear container with lid for temporary holding/viewing
- Reptile and amphibian guide book
- Insect/tick repellent
- Camera
- Notebook/pencil
- GPS unit
- Gloves (for handling snakes)