Vernal Pools

It was a typical Cape Cod Spring day--damp, soft winds out of the northwest demanding a sweater; but nothing to curtail a walk in the woods. The sun was shining, I packed a good lunch, grabbed the dog, and off we went.

We were only about half hour into our walk when after turning a bend we heard a raucous sound, and I said to the dog "there must be a huge flock of ducks somewhere amongst all that thick vegetation!" She thought so too. A few feet closer and it all stopped, but no ducks flew into the air. "Darn!" she barked.

We each observed the area more closely, me by sight and she with her exquisite nose . We were proximate to a wetland, a big "puddle" that was as much water as it was debris. No duck in its right mind would consider this a worthy stopover. So who was imitating ducks?

I laughed at myself as I realized that puddle was a classic vernal pool. And that sound wasn't from ducks, but rather from wood frogs! The wood frog is among the first frog to vocalize at the onset of spring once temperatures get above freezing. Come to think of it, I had heard spring peepers the evening before. I should have been a little quicker in my identification.

I felt a need to explain to the dog (she's smart!): "Hey dog, a vernal pool is a contained basin depression that holds water for two to three months or more. It lacks fish and supports the breeding of critters like wood frogs, spotted salamanders, fairy shrimp and it fills with water with the spring rains. By late summer, it's generally (but not always) dry. These animals totally rely on these big puddles to stay in existence, so it's a rare, very unique, and important habitat."

The dog looked interested (or did she know it was lunchtime?), so I continued "spring peepers are chorus frogs, (technically tree frogs since they have sticky toe pads for climbing trees). Spring peepers, however, rarely climb above knee-level. They're hard to see and are also very small, about the size of a nickel. But for little guys, when croaking together the chorus can be deafening."

"Let's sit down with our lunch and wait for the chorus to begin!" She really liked that suggestion.

Chatham has a number of vernal pools. A local 5th grade class documented vernal pool species in the wetland in the Triangle property and had it certified by the state. If you're lucky enough to have one on your property, protect it. Enjoy it!

For more information on vernal pools: www.vernalpool.org or contact the Chatham Conservation Commission at 508.945.5164.