

Night of the Spotted Salamanders

By Shirley Vernick

Spotted salamanders leave their hiding places only to hunt for bugs and worms—except for one night every year.



Spotted salamanders can grow to be nine inches long.

On one night, every year, spotted salamanders take a hike. It's on the first rainy night after the snows have melted and the temperature is 40 degrees (F) or more. They leave their homes and crawl to the pond where they hatched. Once there, they swim and mate. That is, if they don't get run over by a car when crossing the road.

In Amherst, Massachusetts, the salamanders must cross a busy road. So the people of Amherst decided to help the salamanders. They built two salamander-sized tunnels under the street and added short fences called "drift fences" to help the salamanders find the tunnels. Every year, on that rainy night, the salamanders use these tunnels to reach their pond.



Kids help fix the drift fences so salamanders can find the tunnels.



Below this mossy log is a vernal pond where salamanders mate.

A Little Help from Friends

The tunnels need fixing up each year before the first rain. Last year, seven-year-old Xavier helped. "I helped smooth out the path the salamanders take from the forest to the tunnel," he said. "A bunch of us also filled in the spaces under the drift fence with dirt, so the salamanders won't be able to crawl under it and get lost."

Eight-year-old John helped, also. "These salamanders are really cool-looking, and they're bigger than most salamanders," he said. "My nature class helped repair the drift fences. It feels good to help these animals—and the frogs and toads that also use the tunnels."

Better Tunnels

The Amherst salamanders were the first to have tunnels, but not the first to have the problem of crossing busy roads. Spotted salamanders live throughout the eastern United States and Canada. They spend all day under rocks or logs in the

underground burrows of other forest animals. At night they come out to hunt for bugs and worms.

The one exception is at mating time. That's when they emerge from the forest and crawl to their wetland ponds. When the salamanders reach the pond, they swim and mate. Then each female lays up to 200 eggs in jelly-like globs.

After a few days in the pond, the salamanders crawl back to the forest, leaving the eggs behind. The eggs hatch in one or two months. The young salamanders will be ready to leave the pond and crawl to the forest after another two to four months.

Today, there are also salamander tunnels in California, Canada, and the town of Princeton, Massachusetts.

"We're continually learning new things to make the tunnels better," says Ted Watt, who works at Amherst's Hitchcock Center for the Environment. "For example, we've found that the salamanders like having some light in the tunnel. New tunnels will include more openings for light to enter from the night sky." 



In Amherst, salamanders use tunnels to cross a busy road.