



Great Swamp Ecological Restoration Site March – Natural Events

1. **Here** at the kiosk, trail stop number two, is a good spot to spend a half hour scanning the brush piles and the edge of the shrubby ditch bank for one of my favorite winged spirits – the allusive but ever present fox sparrow. Anybody who stares at a bird feeder in winter for any period of time will sooner or later notice that one different looking sparrow amongst the ground feeding regulars – the junco's, white throated, house and tree sparrows. You can't miss this guy in a crowd – he's the one with reddish-copper streaked breast, plumper than all the rest. You may notice a fox sparrow foraging naturally on the forest floor, scratching at the ground synchronously with both feet in towhee fashion. By the time March turns into April, like the juncos and the tree sparrows, the fox sparrow will start to make a northward trek for the sole purpose of reconnecting with their breeding grounds. When the winged-fox is gone I know that spring will soon be here.
2. **Visiting** this site during the month of March will indoctrinate you to a true forested wetland. Most of the time this property stays soggy but this month you'll find it down right quagging. One must remember that we're located in the *Great Swamp Watershed* and with this illustrious title comes the responsibility to remind us all that the ground we stand on is an ever draining ancient glacier lake – geologists call it Glacial Lake Passaic. As the snow melts and the spring rains fall this site refuels the ground water that prepares the system for some pretty neat natural events.
3. **Probably** my favorite natural event of the year comes in response to all this March irrigation. Walk on any of our trails and you will eventually come upon temporary pools of water called vernal ponds. These ponds are virtual panoply's of life. Amphibians are naturally attracted to them from all corners of their home range by some ancient evolutionary pathway in order to breed and fulfill the promise of future generations. See if you can identify the love calls of our site's three major frog species – the spring peeper, wood frog, and American toad will all be calling when the temperatures rise above 45 degrees. All three species breed in and around these woodland oases.
4. **If** you take a moonlit hike this month and hang out at any of our numerous vernal sites you might be blessed by the sight of a barred owl (state threatened species) which have been know to hunt frogs from the trees that surround vernal ponds. I've been fortunate enough to witness this behavior and have heard it recounted from other fellow naturalists. Please contact the Harding Township police (973) 827-2220, if you plan to visit us at night so they know who it is parking at the entrance.
5. **Vernal** ponds are what ecologist's term – lentic – or still water habitats – and because vernal ponds eventually dry up by late spring and early summer they remain relatively free of predatory fish and insects. This allows species like salamanders and frogs to lay eggs, hatch and develop with out fear of being devoured by would-be predators. Look for the ball-like egg masses of wood frogs in the vernal pond off the orange trail which is well marked on our trail guide.
6. **When** walking our trails along the ditches don't hesitate to glance in the water. You might catch a glimpse of the annual barracuda-like visitor to these channels – the beautifully adorned red-finned pickerel. This predatory fish is a voracious hunter of other smaller fish and insects. If a very heavy rainy period were to unfold this month these fish may be able to get into some of our vernal ponds by means of flood channels and could be lethal to all those amphibian egg masses thought to be safe from isolation. Nature's way I guess to help balance the scales.