

Loudoun County loves its local amphibians

By JENNIFER FULCHER
Times-Mirror Staff Writer

More than 40 volunteers crammed into Leesburg's Rust Nature Sanctuary in February to learn about a new program dedicated to saving local amphibians.

The Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy officially launched the first year of the Loudoun Amphibian Monitoring Program on Feb. 15.

Nicole Hamilton, president of the conservancy, began the volunteer orientation by explaining the need to monitor frogs, toads and salamanders.

"Amphibian populations are declining, and scientists don't know why," she said. "More data needs to be gathered in order to figure out what's happening."

The program will be the first of its

kind in Loudoun, providing critical information about what amphibian species are in Loudoun, how many of each species there are and where they can be found. By gathering this information, the conservancy can see which areas need to be protected.

"I think this is a great year to be involved because it really is creating that foundation for the program," Hamilton said.

Amphibians indicate the health of the local environment, she said. The animals have permeable skin that absorbs water and other elements, including fertilizers, pesticides and other pollutants.

A decline in amphibian populations may point to pollution. This program is the first step in identifying if there is a decline in species and what

the cause could be, she said.

"Amphibians are fun," Hamilton said. "They're cute, very endearing." With a total of 56 volunteers signed up for the program, Hamilton is not alone in her sentiments.

"I'm really excited about getting going with this," volunteer Beth Arsenault, of Lovettsville, said. "I've always really appreciated amphibians."

Volunteers can choose from three different monitoring activities through the program, including frog call surveys, site surveys and migration mapping.

"It enables us to look across the different species," Hamilton said. "It also enables different volunteers to get involved in different ways."

Those choosing frog call surveys

will go to a chosen location and listen and document frog and toad calls for five minutes. Volunteers repeat these steps at a total of 10 locations over about five miles.

Those choosing site surveys visit a chosen location to document all of the amphibians seen or heard there. Both the frog call and site surveys last through Aug. 15 and can be conducted a minimum of four times or as often as every other week.

Those choosing migration monitoring go out each rainy night to scout for roads between March and June. When a migration is identified, other volunteers will be contacted to help the amphibians survive the road crossing.

Hamilton encouraged all volunteers

to buy reflective gear so they will be visible to cars near roadways. Monitoring is easier and safer in pairs, she added. "People can join at any point in the year," Hamilton said. "I really do hope to expand the program."

Allison Hubbard, a volunteer from Leesburg, attended the orientation with her husband and 5-year-old son. "We want to get [our son] started in being environmentally aware," she said. "It's a family activity."

All ages and experience levels are encouraged to participate.

To volunteer, visit www.LoudounWildlife.org or e-mail nhamilton@loudounwildlife.org.

Contact the reporter at jfulcher@timespapers.com