Why Wildlife Matters: The Spotted Salamander

BRENDAN GMYREK JANUARY 20, 2026

Winter 2026 Newsletter

By Stephanie Ellis, Executive Director, Wild Care, Inc.

The Spotted Salamander is a beautiful and familiar New England woodland species. This large black salamander (4.5–7.5 inches) is marked with yellow or orange spots and spends most of its life underground. Each spring, it emerges to breed in fishless vernal pools.

Active in Cold Weather

In late winter and early spring, environmental cues—temperatures above 42°F, heavy rain, thawed ground, and often a full moon—trigger salamanders to emerge from **brumation**, a cold-weather dormancy that slows metabolism and prevents freezing. They migrate to swamps, slow streams, and vernal pools to breed and lay gelatinous egg masses, then return to the forest by late April to remain underground for the rest of the year.

Why Spotted Salamanders Matter

Spotted Salamanders play a vital role in forest and wetland health:

- **Indicator species**: Their permeable skin makes them sensitive to pollution, signaling clean water and healthy forests.
- **Ecosystem balance**: They control insect populations, cycle nutrients, and connect aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems.
- **Food web support**: They and their eggs are an important food source for birds, snakes, fish, and mammals.
- **Climate benefits**: By reducing leaf-eating insects, they help store carbon in forest soils.
- **Vernal pool protection**: Their dependence on temporary pools highlights and helps protect these critical habitats.
- **Unique partnerships**: Algae living in their egg masses provide oxygen, while the eggs supply nutrients to the algae.

Window Wells: A Hidden Danger

In March and April, salamanders often fall into window wells while migrating.

- Encourage homeowners to **check window wells regularly**.
- With clean hands or gloves, place salamanders under moist leaf litter nearby or into fresh water **on the same property**.
- Never relocate salamanders to new areas.
- Adding a board, branch, or bark to window wells year-round allows trapped animals to escape.

Safe Handling

- Handle only with **clean bare hands** or powder-free nitrile/vinyl gloves (rinse gloves first).
- Avoid lotions, oils, or latex gloves.
- Hold gently around the mid-body—never by the head, legs, or tail.
- Wash hands after handling; skin secretions are irritating but harmless to humans unless ingested.
- Spotted Salamanders are considered poisonous when ingested. Do not kiss or eat a salamander.

When to Call a Wildlife Rehabilitator

If a Spotted Salamander is found above ground during freezing conditions or outside normal breeding activity, it may be unable to return to shelter. In these cases, contact a **licensed wildlife rehabilitator** for assessment and safe release back where it was found when the weather is favorable. Injured salamanders should go into the care of a licensed wildlife rehabilitator.

Recently, a conservation biologist, found a Spotted Salamander while enjoying time outdoors at Nickerson State Park in Brewster. It was walking in the snow after a long cold spell. It is now safely in our care at Wild Care until the weather is favorable for a release. We have the GPS location, and she will go back to exactly where she was found when the time comes.

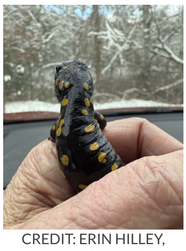
How You Can Help Our Spotted Salamanders

- Protect vernal pools and surrounding forests
- Avoid using pesticides that leach into the watershed
- Check and modify window wells
- Drive slowly on rainy spring nights
- Help Spotted Salamanders cross the road to the direction they are headed during the April-May breeding season
- Leave natural cover like logs and leaf litter intact
- Keep dogs leashed and cats indoors in sensitive salamander habitats

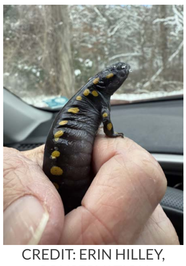
Small actions can make a big difference for this important woodland species!



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SPOTTED SALAMANDER REHYDRATING

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SPOTTED SALAMANDER IN WINDOW WELL

SPOTTED SALAMANDER HABITAT

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