

'A little ecosystem': 9-year-old discovers rare salamanders in window well at Ryerson Woods



Zoe Kemerer of Gages Lake discovered "a little ecosystem" inside a window well at a Lake County Forest Preserve. (Brushwood Center)

Frank S. Abderholden

Contact Reporter News-Sun

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A 9-year-old girl from Gages Lake, Zoe Kemerer, has been named wildlife wrangler extraordinaire for discovering rare blue-spotted salamanders at the Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods in Riverwoods.

While the blue-spotted salamander is not endangered and is common around the Great Lakes region and north into Canada, it can be found in Illinois only in the northeastern part of the state. It lives in northern swamp forests of white oaks, maple and basswood that have temporary, fish-free ponds, according to the Illinois Natural History Survey.

Kemerer's story starts with the lull between the end of summer camps and the beginning of school, which means she got to go with her mother, Julia, to work for a few days at the Brushwood Center at the Lake County Forest Preserve's Ryerson Conservation Area.

"She enjoys helping out. She is really wonderful," said Catherine Game, executive director of the center. "As part of her volunteer job, she was going to clean out the window well."

Zoe's mother said they saw a frog there, and since she was coming to work with her mother, she thought that would be a good volunteer chore.

She got to wrangling, and what she discovered inspired her to write a story about what she found. What exactly was in the window well besides leaf litter, twigs and mud from decomposing material?

It turned out there were a dozen blue-spotted salamanders, along with six American toads, two northern leopard frogs, one bullfrog and dozens of nightcrawler worms. She divided her catch into boxes, and that got seven adult artists who were at Ryerson for a drawing class to venture out and see what the young volunteer was up to. They were impressed.

"It was so adorable," Game said.

"It was just amazing how many things she found," said Julia Kemerer. "Now every time we come to the forest preserve, that's the first thing she goes to check."

Zoe said she did not find the salamanders slimy. "They were soft — it feels like a baby," she said. And once she found one, she was sure she was going to find more.

Blue-spotted salamanders begin mating at 2 years of age, and they can lay up to 500 eggs, according to Chicago Wilderness. They eat spiders, centipedes, slugs and earthworms. The Illinois Natural History Survey says there are approximately 650 species of salamander in the world, 20 of which are found in Illinois. The blue-spotted salamander is one that can lose its tail to a predator and grow it back.

Zoe decided she was going to write a story about her adventure into the window well.

"One lovely March morning, there was a mother salamander ready to lay her eggs. She found a nice corner of a window well with a little bit of water there. Little did she know, she was being watched ... right there leaping out of the leaves was a big, old, slimy, bullfrog! It jumped at the mother salamander and ate her all up!" she wrote.

"A few months passed and the baby salamanders hatched and now the bullfrog was even more hungry than before. He then ate 23 baby salamanders! Only 12 salamanders were left and they ran under the leaves only eating smaller worms that just came to hide there too."

As the story continues, the salamanders talked amongst themselves about their living arrangement, and "a few weeks passed and salamander 5 said, 'I want to get out of the window well and be free of having to eat the small worms that the big frogs did not want.' Salamander 9 said, 'Now we all know that won't happen so stop getting your hopes up.'

"Right then a nice lady came and picked them all up and saved them — even the frogs and toads. All the animals screamed 'Thank you!' The nice lady replied with a nice grin and walked off."

Julia said Zoe was very thorough in going through the mud, leaves and twigs to make sure she found everything she could. "She had no problem with the nightcrawlers, and they were the biggest ones I had ever seen," Kemerer said.

Zoe said after she found the first salamander, her thought was, "Ummm, there's going to be more," and she was right. She was slightly disappointed, she added, because, "I wanted to find a snake."

She even described the window well as "a little ecosystem," where the worms ate the leaves and the mud, and the salamanders and frogs ate the worms, and the frogs also ate some of the salamanders.

Zoe has been visiting the forest preserves since she was a baby, and she spends summer camp in Gurnee, "where they are outside all the time," said her mother. She is not one to bring animals home, because, as her mother explained, she knows you can study them for a while, but they are not pets and have to be left alone.

According to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the primary threat for Illinois salamanders includes habitat degradation, habitat fragmentation and habitat loss. Many populations have been eliminated, reduced or separated through loss of habitat, according to the IDNR.

For the Ryerson blue-spotted salamanders, Zoe relocated them to wet areas with logs, took the frogs to some ponds and found the earthworms a new home in leaf debris.

Zoe has said she would like to work with animals when she grows up, maybe in a zoo setting. In the meantime, she continues to have fun whenever she is

outdoors. But she is also keeping an eye out for her favorite animal: the cheetah.

Maybe someday she will help them as well.

fabderholden@tribpub.com

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