Neighborhood News

Summer 2010

Ruxton-Riderwood-Lake Roland Area Improvement Association

Toad Haul

by Bliss McCord

One rainy night this spring, as I was winding my way home down the Bellona Avenue hill, my heart sank. Down at the bottom were the telltale signs of a car accident: flashing hazard lights, orangey-red highway cones, men with flashlights. Judging by the amount of activity, I worried that the accident might be serious.

Jack Flynn, a member of the Toad Relay System.
Photo by Kevin Flynn

As I was waved around the cones by someone who looked like The Fisherman from the Gorton's ads, my eyes darted to the right, drawn by more lights well off the road. "Oh, no", I thought, "someone has gone off the road and into Towson Run." I slowed my car as my passenger rolled down her window. "What's going on?" she inquired of Mr. Gorton. Just then, there was action on the road. Hop. Hop. Hop. A toad flopped his way across my headlights. "We're just helping the toads across the street," he answered. "Oops, there goes one. It's the annual migration to Lake Roland."

With the driver behind me growing impatient, I had to move on and it wasn't until recently that I gave that night a second thought. An email to Executive Director Peggy Squitieri brought that event back into focus. A new RRLRAIA resident had heard some stories about area residents transporting frogs across Bellona and wanted to know if this was a local tradition or just folklore. A little checking around netted Kevin Flynn and his son, Jack, who have participated in the annual event the last two springs. As the Flynn family drove to one of Jack's lacrosse games, Kevin described their experience via car phone, with Jack chiming in from the back seat.

It seems that each spring hundreds, perhaps thousands, of toads make their annual migration from Towson Run to Lake Roland, looking for true love. They used to swim through the culvert where Towson Run is piped under Bellona. For at least 15 years now, however, siltation has forced the toads to go overland across the road. The resultant carnage gave birth to a new volunteer movement, what we are calling The Toad Brigade. Woe to the toad who tries crossing without its help. Toad escorting is not unique to Towson. In Philadelphia, parts of Port Royal Avenue and Eva Street are closed annually so that local toads can make their way from the hills of the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education to the Roxborough Reservoir in hopes of finding a mate.

Kevin described an evening of toad hauling like this. First, there is no set date. Only Mother Nature knows when volunteers will get THE CALL, but it comes on the first rainy night following the first warm spell in spring. That day there is frantic texting, emailing, and phone calling to volunteers. They know where to meet—along the stream, at dark. They know what to wear—rain slickers and boots. They know what equipment to bring—flashlights and buckets. The only unknown is how many amphibians will go a-courting that night.

Volunteers park their cars along Rolandvue and head to the stream. The TRS (Toad Relay System) is carefully explained to novitiates. First, catch all the

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toads you can and put them in your bucket. You don't need to look under rocks or behind trees. These toads don't hide; they are *everywhere*. This part is fun and easy, as toads are much slower than their frog cousins. Next, take your bucket to the leaders, where your catch will be emptied into bins with other toads, counted, and their sexes determined. Then, the authorities transport their toadloads across the street and one, and only one person (the Grand Toadmaster, as I prefer to call him or her) crosses the dangerous Light Rail tracks and, with a flourish, sets his captives free. Without so much as the wave of a cold little webbed foot, off they go.

Can you imagine the excitement? The mess? The memories? It made me yearn for young children again. What could be more fun than slipping and slithering along a stream bank in the muddy dark of night in search of hopping critters? You can just hear the shouts of excitement and laughter—"Hey, Dad, look at this one!" Splash!! "Mom, I fell in!" Flashlights scan and flicker, picking up movement as hundreds of toads move in and around the stream with one and only one destination in mind—the mother of all puddles, Lake Roland. Kevin reports that this scene is repeated for several nights, with dozens of volunteers nightly. One hundred toads owe their lives to the Flynn boys this year. If you think that's amazing, Kevin said that the night before they volunteered, things were really hopping with six hundred toads escorted across Bellona. Toadily awesome.