

Volunteers in Parks

Feature:
Rough-skinned Newt X-ING

Volunteer Profile:
Simon Bluck

Staff Profile:
Adria Hussain

Volunteer & Park Updates



What's new?

- » In Memory of David Leigh
- » Regional Trail Widening and Lighting
- » New Trail Signs at Mount Work Regional Park
- » Nature Programming

Rough-skinned Newt X-ING

By Colleen Long

When most of us think about migration, we often think about the migration of birds, or other animals that make incredible journeys going from their breeding to wintering grounds. Migratory movements are often associated with reproduction. This is true for the annual migration of one of most common amphibians in coastal BC, the Rough-skinned Newt (*Taricha granulosa*).

Rough-skinned Newts are a type of salamander. They are fairly large for a salamander and adults can reach a maximum length of 22 centimetres. Salamanders generally have long slender bodies, are smooth-skinned with four legs and a long tail. Newts usually have rougher skin than other kinds of salamander.

... continued on page 2



This is the case for the Rough-skinned Newts which have granular, relatively dry skin that is dark brown to grey on their backs and bright yellow or orange on their bellies. Their brightly coloured bellies are a distinguishing feature and this colouration serves as a warning to would be predators as their skin secretions produce a powerful neurotoxin. When threatened, individuals will rear up and raise their head and tail, showing their brightly coloured bellies. All amphibians have some sort of noxious or poisonous skin secretions for defense, but Rough-skinned Newts have by far the most potent skin

toxin of any North American amphibian. It contains enough poison to kill 25,000 mice! It is an effective defense against many would be predators, though Garter Snakes have evolved a resistance to the toxins in the skin of Rough-skinned Newts and are one of its major predators.

Rough-skinned Newts are found on the Pacific Coast as far north as Alaska and south to California from sea level up to 2,700 metres. In BC, they are found throughout Vancouver Island, on some Gulf Islands and along the coast of the mainland. Newts are commonly found in forested environments near permanent ponds or swamps and live in, and under, rotting logs. The adult and larval forms of Rough-skinned Newts are carnivores and feed on a variety of organisms including insects, slugs, worms, amphibian eggs and larvae.

Some salamanders are entirely aquatic; whereas others are entirely terrestrial. Most salamanders found in BC are terrestrial when adult, but have larvae that live in the water. Each spring, Rough-skinned Newts migrate to breeding ponds. Newt eggs hatch 3-4 weeks after being laid and the larvae metamorphose into their terrestrial form over the summer. Some adult newts live in and around lake or ponds throughout the summer or year round; whereas others return to the forest after breeding. On southern Vancouver Island, male newts tend to remain aquatic year round while females are largely terrestrial, there is no known reason for this observed difference.

In some locations in BC, as on Cortes Island, large numbers of Rough-skinned Newts can be found migrating in the spring and fall as they move between their wetland habitats in the spring for breeding and their forest habitats in the fall where they forage until cooler weather forces them to hibernate under logs and debris where conditions remain moist and do not freeze. During these times as they traverse between these two habitats there are road crossings and large number of newts are killed by vehicles, so residents of Cortes Island created The Newt X-ING Action Project whose aim is to remind people to drive carefully during the mild and wet months of the year (spring and fall) and to keep an eye out for newts on the roadways. They post yellow and black NEWT X-ING signs on roadways where newts cross in large numbers.



Photo credit: Friends of Cortes



If you have never had the opportunity to see a Rough-skinned Newt, we have a pair at the Nature Centre at Francis/King Regional Park, which is open on Saturdays, Sundays and Holiday Mondays from noon-4pm. It is believed that the newts came to us from the Herpetology Lab at University of Victoria in around 2008/2009 when the newts were about 10 years old. Newts can live up to 30 years in captivity, so we estimate that the newts may be about 23 years old. In the wild, newts can live as long as 12 years.

We will keep and care for the newts for the remainder of their lives. We do not plan on replacing them when they die.

Though we have moved away from keeping live creatures in the Nature Centres, it is not possible to release the newts into the wild as it is doubtful that they could survive on their own and also because of the fact that they could introduce harmful bacteria or other pathogens that may harm native amphibian populations.

For the most part Rough-skinned Newts are doing quite well in coastal BC as they can occupy a variety of habitats and are less vulnerable to predators. Like all wildlife, habitat loss and climate change are the two greatest threats facing wildlife worldwide. To help you can learn more about amphibians and ways to protect their habitat or join [BC Frogwatch](#) to help biologists learn more about the range, distribution and habits of amphibians. The more we know about our local amphibians, the more that can be done to protect them and remember to also to keep an eye for newts crossing roadways at this time of year and next spring.

Sources:

Ministry of Environment Lands & Parks. BC Frog Watch – Factsheet #5 Rough-skinned Newt (*Taricha granulosa*) [Fact sheet]. <http://a100.gov.bc.ca/pub/eirs/finishDownloadDocument.do?subdocumentId=7962>

Canadian Herpetology Society. (2021). Rough-skinned Newt (*Taricha granulosa*) www.canadianherpetology.ca/species/species_page.html?cname=Rough-skinned%20Newt

Baker, R. (2020) Newt X-ing ahead: B.C. islanders post road signs to help migrating salamanders, Canada's National Observer, 23 October. Available at: <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2020/10/23/news/rough-skinned-newt-crossing-bc-cortes-island>



Volunteer Profile

Simon Bluck has been a long-term Restoration Volunteer with Regional Parks since May 2018.

Tell us a bit about yourself?

I lived in the UK and worked as a software engineer (ok, computer nerd) until I retired and came over to permanently live in Canada, in 2015. In 2018 I discovered the CRD and various other organizations I could volunteer with and haven't looked back since. I volunteer all the time with, and am dedicated to:

CRD - whenever they have a restoration event, and indeed whenever asked on other occasions. Lots of nice people. View Royal - my first ever invasive pull was with the leader Chris, at Edwards Park, that I happen to live right next to, and that I now help maintain.

Havenwood Park - led by Carol, and the nicest bunch of people you could hope to find!

Mill Hill - So many invasives, particularly broom, daphne, holly and blackberry. Over the years, much work has been done to try and reduce that. As our contribution, Margaret How and myself have been working (for nearly 2 years now, and with permission) to eliminate invasives visible from the main trail up Mill Hill. We're on our second pass - the first pass took out significant amounts but wasn't focused on full elimination. Our second pass is aiming for complete elimination.

I also volunteer with Habitat Acquisition Trust and, just very occasionally now, with the Green Team. Oh and I do Airbnb too.

What is your favourite volunteer memory or experience?

I have fond memories of all my volunteer experiences! Hot, cold, wet - love them or hate them at the time, when I look back they have all become fond memories, regardless. I suppose the best ones are when you achieve complete removal of an invasive through diligent hard work and you feel that you've made a significant impact. At least, until the next year when many of those invasives re-appear! Still, it is progress, gradual progress.

What do you most enjoy about volunteering with Regional Parks?

Well of course one of the nicest things about volunteering is working with people you know, and indeed new people you don't know at first but gradually get familiar with. With the CRD, there is an impressive variety of locations and it is always interesting and fun to visit new places.



Staff Profile

Adria Hussain, Senior Park Naturalist since June 2019

What is your position and when did you start working at Regional Parks?

My position is Senior Park Naturalist. I coordinate the environmental and cultural interpretation programs and I started at the CRD about two years ago.

What do you enjoy about working at Regional Parks?

Something I really enjoy about my role at Regional Parks is the variety. Whenever I engage with someone in a park, they bring something unique to the day. Whether its questions from students or stories visitors share, the experience is always changing and helps me see the parks through a different lens. I also love seeing the impact our team has on visitors. There's nothing more rewarding as watching someone get excited and have an "Aha!" moment when one of the park interpreters facilitates a new connection.

Tell us a bit about yourself

I moved to Victoria two years ago and I couldn't be happier with that decision. I was blown away when I first learned that I would be able to commute to work by bike through the forest on the Galloping Goose Regional Trail. I studied geography at UBC and once I had a few years of experience working in parks and museums, I completed a teaching degree focused on experiential education. That training confirmed that teaching outdoors is my passion and I returned to working in parks. I get a lot of joy out of traveling, bike riding, foraging food, and eating ice cream. Recently I have been learning woodworking from my dad. These days, working alongside him and my partner Jordan in the woodshop is one of my favorite ways to spend a rainy day.



In Memory of David Leigh

By Colleen Long

Sadly, David Leigh, Park Steward, passed away unexpectedly at his home on July 17 at the age of 77. David patrolled a section of the Galloping Goose out near Sooke River Road, a more wilderness section of the trail. In his Park Steward Activity Reports, he would let us know about downed trees on the trail, vandalized signs, missing padlocks on bollards, re-sprouting of the invasive Japanese knotweed and a myriad of other things. He also let us know about interesting wildlife he had seen and unusual encounters along the trail, though not all were believable, as in his one report when he accused a bear of stealing his nametag. He often ended his reports that it was a great day in the park, a privilege and thanked us.

David first began with us in 2003 and at the 2018 Volunteer Recognition Event he received his 15th year award. When I became the Coordinator of Volunteers in 2009, I had to opportunity to get to know David, though in reading his obituary they were many things about David that I didn't know. How in his younger years he played field hockey and cricket, was a pilot and sailed.

I knew that David had suffered a severe stroke in 1989, which left him partially paralyzed and affected his walking ability, but it did not seem to really slow him down. After his stroke he became involved in a great number of activities, horseback riding, sailing, skiing and paddling on the Gorge and eventually he began volunteering at Regional Parks. He never complained about his disability and always had a joke or story to tell.

He frequently travelled to England to visit his family and to Australia to visit with his son's family and his two grandchildren. He loved to vacation in Hawaii and often signed off on his emails with "Mahalo." David would always let me know when he was heading off on one of his adventures. Before one trip, he let me know that he was going to do some research on the effects of Australian beer on CRD Volunteers.

What I will remember most about David was his lovely disposition, great sense of humour and fabulous smile. David attended almost all of the Volunteer Recognition Events and most of the Volunteer Continuing Education sessions. After the events or sessions, he would send me an email letting me know how much he enjoyed the event, how great it was to see the other volunteers, how much he had learned and thanked staff for hosting the event. On more than one occasion, he mentioned that being a Park Steward with Regional Parks was the best job he ever had.

When I sent out the notice of his passing to the volunteers, Sue Schaeffer, Volunteer Naturalist at Francis/King sent back a reply, *"Such sad news. He had such challenges in life but you would never know it. I always made a point of seeking him out at any of our CRD gatherings as I was guaranteed a laugh and a warm welcome. Just a gem of a human being. He truly will be missed and was an inspiration to all of us."*

Jenny Eastman, former Coordinator of Volunteers with Regional Parks, when hearing of his passing remarked how she had such warm feelings and memories of David and that he was such a lovely man that we were both so privileged to know – "from another generation of charm, grace and respectability."

Mahalo David, it was a privilege and pleasure to have known you.



Volunteer & Park Updates

Public engagement on the Regional Trails Widening and Lighting Project was conducted in spring 2021. Results indicate strong support for the separated use pathway design and lighting concept, as well as for the proposed implementation sequence. Municipal and provincial partners are also in support of advancing the project by identifying project synergies, collaborating on design and pursuing funding. The CRD Board has directed staff to actively develop partnerships and pursue grant funding opportunities, including submission to the federal Active Transportation Fund, to support implementation of the separated use pathway design with lighting.

Mount Work Regional Park has new signage in the mountain biking area - Hartland. This new signage will help riders better navigate the trail system. Multi-use trails open to mountain biking lie on the east slope of Mount Work, separate from the main park. These trails cover a range of terrain, from moderate, rolling hills to the most difficult grade for advanced mountain bikers.



Regional Parks interpretive programs are up and running again and a wide variety of guided, interpretive walks are being offered this fall. In Exploring Indigenous Perspectives, join Regional Parks cultural programmer, Leslie McGarry, for a walk at Francis/King Regional Park and discover a human history spanning thousands of years. Learn about the cultural significance of plants, animals and the seasons and how First Peoples deeply respect, appreciate and celebrate gifts from forests, rivers, lakes and the sea. There is no fee for this program but you must pre-register. For dates, times, more information, and to pre-register, visit our [events page](#).

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