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GREEN-MOUNTAIN

New Monkton salamander crossing saves hundreds

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Hundreds of salamanders and frogs have avoided becoming roadkill this spring, thanks to two new amphibian-friendly underpasses in Monkton.

Two wide concrete culverts are successfully funneling the creatures under a section of Monkton-Vergennes Road that infamously separates swampy breeding pools from upland overwintering sites, Salisbury-based herpetologist James Andrews said.

Motorists on that stretch of highway, part of an increasingly popular shortcut between U.S. 7 and Taft Corners, have inflicted mortality rates of more than 50 percent on amphibians during spring and fall migrations, Andrews said.

In past years, volunteers have attempted nocturnal bucket-brigade rescues for the amphibians, to little effect — and at some risk to the humans who crossed the roadway.

For the past two weeks, Andrews said, cameras have recorded the safe passage of scores of rare, blue-spotted salamanders, wood frogs, spring peepers, yellow-spotted salamanders, Eastern newts and four-toed salamanders.

“We are just thrilled to see how well the underpasses are working,” Andrews said. “It was a huge investment of time and money and volunteers.”

Completed in the fall, the \$290,000 project took a decade of planning and fundraising by the Monkton Conservation Commission and the Lewis Creek Association.

A Vermont Agency of Transportation/Federal Highway Administration grant provided \$150,000 toward construction; a Vermont Fish and Wildlife State Wildlife Action Grant accounted for \$45,000.

Private donations from across the country raised about \$119,200, according to the Lewis Creek Association.

Essex-based engineering firm Lamoureux and Dickinson designed the new structures, which were installed by S.D. Ireland of Williston.

The culverts also will allow small mammals such as skunks, raccoon and foxes to cross Monkton-Vergennes Road, Andrews said.

Would such animals make a buffet of the freshly concentrated parade of amphibians under the road?

Not to any devastating extent, Andrews answered: “The biggest predators are the cars.”

Wildlife specialists will continue to monitor the culverts for four-legged traffic, he added, but would-be tourists would be wise to steer clear.

“That stretch of road is as dangerous for humans as it is for amphibians,” Andrews said. “If you want to see amphibians — we suggest you go elsewhere.”

Monkton plans so salamanders cross the road

This story was originally published online March. 28, 2016. Contact Joel Banner Baird at 802-660-1843 or joelbaird@freepressmedia.com. Follow him on Twitter at www.twitter.com/vtgoingup.

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