

Having a ball for autism support

BY RACHEL UDA
rachel.uda@newsday.com

Basketball players filled the gym at Jericho High School on Saturday to raise thousands of dollars for autism support.

This year, the 13th annual Alley Oop for Autism tournament raised about \$100,000 for the Family Center for Autism, a Garden City-based nonprofit that offers classes and activities for people with autism.

Hundreds of children and adults played in short, 3-on-3 games, while in a separate gym, special-needs teams faced each other in full-court basketball games.

"It's a good idea for a good cause," said Spencer Smith, 14, who played with his brother Maxwell on a team of eighth-grade boys in the main gym.

Former New York Jets safety Erik Coleman and Michelle "Angel" Athenas of Huntington, who has autism, ADHD bipolar disorder and won four gold medals in powerlifting at the 2019 Special Olympics World Games, both stopped by the tournament.

"I have autism, that's why I came here to support all the kids and show them what people with disabilities can do," Athenas said with her medals draped around her neck.

Justin Resnick, 28, started the tournament in 2007 when he was a junior shooting guard at Jericho High School. He always had an interest in helping children on the spectrum, so Resnick started the event and raised about \$100,000 for the

Ascent School in Deer Park that specialized in educating children with autism.

Debbie Levine, whose son attended Ascent, said she was so moved by Resnick and his cause that she has been volunteering ever since.

"Thirteen years ago, my husband and I came to see the event," said Levine of Roslyn. "I was so overcome with emotion, I started to cry, seeing that 300 people were in this gym and all doing their part to help us."

After graduating from Jericho, Resnick went off to play basketball at Emory University in Atlanta, but has returned to his alma mater every year to help plan the tournament.

"I feel like we can't stop now," Resnick said, straining to be heard above the sound of bouncing balls, squeaking sneakers and a DJ playing "Eye of the Tiger." "The rates of autism have shot up, and there are so many institutions that depend on donations."

In a gym next door, the Dream League played against the Nassau County PAL Special Needs Unit. The PAL went up early in what was a fast-paced game from the tip, when Keeara McAllister, 15, streaked down the court and sunk a midrange jumper to cut the lead. Her mother, Cynthia McAllister, raised her hands and cheered from the sideline.

"I love the tournament," said Cynthia McAllister of Jericho. "I feel like it gives them an opportunity to play and compete in an environment they can be comfortable in."

Wet weather

Jeepers! Peepers sing the song of spring's return

BY DAVID M. SCHWARTZ
david.schwartz@newsday.com

After years of dry weather, a wet winter and spring has filled the Island's natural landscapes with an abundance of seasonal freshwater vernal ponds teeming with fairy shrimp and other woodland creatures, ecologists and state officials said.

The ponds have unlocked dormant eggs of the tiny crustacean fairy shrimp and a proliferation of amorous amphibians — spotted salamanders, wood frogs and spring peepers, a diminutive frog with a mighty high-pitched mating call that signals winter's end.

"This year has been phenomenal," John Turner, a conservation policy advocate for the nonprofit Seatuck Environmental Association, said one warm April night at a vernal pond in Nassau County. "To me, spring peepers are the harbinger of spring. I don't know if they could be much louder."

Vernal ponds, also called vernal pools, can be found in the hilly undeveloped areas of Long Island, from Montauk Point to the Long Island pine barrens farther west in Suffolk to a few miles from the Queens border. Though the bodies are small, state law protects vernal ponds as wetlands of "unusual local importance."

The ponds are an underappreciated and often overlooked natural habitat, local ecologists said.

Vernal ponds "don't get much attention because they are pretty small and are sometimes hidden," said Kevin Jennings, the state Department of Environmental Conservation's regional manager for ecosystem health.

At the gated Greentree Estate in Manhasset, a mile off the Long Island Expressway, up a dirt road that winds behind North Shore University Hospital and is tucked back in the woods, there are a series of shallow depressions filled with water.

As the sun goes down at



John Turner, a conservation policy advocate with Seatuck Environmental Association, left, and Enrico Nardone, its director.

Greentree, the chirps of spring peepers, which can fit on the head of a nickel, turn into a chorus, joined by a quack-like mating call of the wood frog. Somewhere in the thigh-high water are spotted salamanders, who've left behind tennis ball-sized egg masses suspended just below the surface, which Turner described as feeling "like a ball of snot. Like Jell-O."

As snow melts and rain falls in February and March, the depressions fill up with water from a few inches to a few feet. After the snow melts, the first life to appear are fairy shrimp, a crustacean that grows up to an inch long. Their dormant eggs, called cysts, can survive for years out of water.

Then come the amphibians. The salamanders use the ponds to reproduce before heading upland into the forest for most of the year, including the endangered Eastern tiger salamander and more common spotted salamander, as well as the spring peepers and wood frogs. Later in the year, other amphibians will call the vernal ponds home. Fowler's toads and gray treefrogs will come in May to June, as well as pickerel frogs, bull frogs and green frogs.

By July, many of the vernal ponds are typically gone, the water evaporated and sucked up by trees and other plant life through transportation, Turner said.

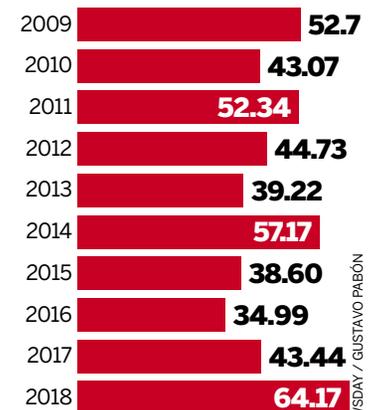
That dry period is important for the life cycle of the vernal ponds. Ponds with water year-round would likely harbor fish that feast on the eggs of the

IF YOU WANT TO GO

State officials recommend these spots to find vernal ponds. They advise to follow local rules of staying on trails, don't take home any specimens, and check yourself for ticks as the weather warms: **Muttontown Preserve in Nassau County; Brookhaven State Park, Ridge; Otis Pike Preserve, Calverton; Robert Cushman Murphy County Park, Manorville.**

SOURCE: New York State Department of Environmental Conservation

Precipitation at Islip (in inches)



SOURCE: NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE

shrimp and amphibians.

But drought-like conditions in recent years lowered groundwater levels, which made many vernal ponds not appear at all or dry up quicker, according to



Children play basketball at Alley Oop for Autism Saturday at Jericho High School. The event raised about \$100,000.

sets ponds alive



NEWSDAY / STEVE POST

Turner inspects a vernal pond in Manhasset for a variety of amphibian life, including fairy shrimp, tiger salamanders and spring peepers.

Jennings.

"A lot of vernal ponds were dry for most of the active parts of the year, when amphibians would be breeding in there," Jennings said. This year, he said, there were many more vernal ponds.

There's no formal count of vernal ponds on Long Island. The last mapping effort was done in the 1980s in Nassau County and

in the 1990s in Suffolk County, when the state was trying to track wetlands.

"The biggest threat is the threat of development. There's the potential they're being lost because they're so small," Jennings said. Even if the pool itself gets protected, it does little

good if upland forest is destroyed. Salamanders, in particular, use the pool for breeding

but then spend most of their lives in the woods.

Turner also said prolific sewerage in some areas has drawn down the aquifer by sending groundwater out to the oceans and bays. That has lowered water tables and diminished vernal ponds.

"As we pump more water up out of the aquifer, and ultimately discharge it out to the Atlantic Ocean, invariably we'll have a drawdown of the aquifer. And these vernal ponds and many other types of wetlands will take it on the chin," he said.

Seatuck has done annual monitoring of vernal ponds and the amphibian population at Greentree Estate, and hopes to do a formal assessment of the amphibians to establish trends.

"The goal is to further quantify the population so we can assess it over time," said Enrico Nardone, executive director of Seatuck. He called the estate "certainly one of the largest populations of these micro-

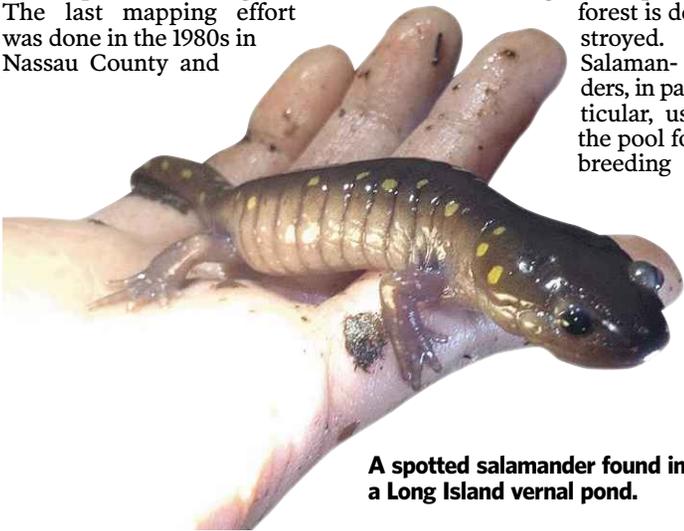
ecosystems left in Nassau County."

Chris Paparo, a naturalist and manager of Stony Brook University's Marine Sciences Center in Southampton, also has taken note of the more abundant vernal ponds this year. Along with the appearance of skunk cabbage and return of osprey, the sound of spring peepers is a sign of the changing season.

He has noticed the change in his backyard. When he bought his house 15 years ago in Calverton, he said, "The first spring was deafening at night from all the peepers."

After four or five years, things got drier. The vernal ponds and bogs in his backyard almost completely disappeared. It got quiet.

But for "the first year in quite a few years," the vernal ponds — and spring peepers, woodfrogs and other amphibians — are back, Paparo said. "We keep the windows open at night. It's the song of spring.



ENRICO NARDONE

A spotted salamander found in a Long Island vernal pond.

Newsday

Long Island Office
235 Pinelawn Rd., Melville, NY
11747-4250

On the Web

For a list of Newsday departments, their emails and telephone numbers, go to newsday.com/contact

For Reprints, Rights & Permissions

NewsdayReprints.com

Home Delivery

800-NEWSDAY
(800-639-7329)
helpme@newsday.com

Newsroom 631-843-2700

Place an Ad/Change an Ad
631-843-SOLD (7653)

Letters to the Editor

Email letters@newsday.com

CORRECTIONS

Newsday strives for the highest level of accuracy and fairness and is committed to promptly correcting errors. Readers can report problems or concerns about content in the paper or on Newsday.com by emailing ND-Editor@newsday.com, calling 631-843-2700 or writing to 235 Pinelawn Rd., Melville, NY 11747, Attention: Corrections.

THIS DATE IN HISTORY

1865 President Abraham Lincoln was shot and mortally wounded by John Wilkes Booth during a performance of "Our American Cousin" at Ford's Theater in Washington.

1912 The British liner RMS Titanic collided with an iceberg in the North Atlantic at 11:40 p.m. ship's time and began sinking. (The ship went under two hours and 40 minutes later with the loss of 1,514 lives.)

1935 The "Black Sunday" dust storm descended upon the central Plains, turning a sunny afternoon into total darkness.

1981 The first test flight of America's first operational space shuttle, the Columbia, ended successfully with a landing at Edwards Air Force Base in California.

1994 Two U.S. Air Force F-15 warplanes mistakenly shot down two U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopters over northern Iraq, killing 26 people, including 15 Americans.

2004 In a historic policy shift, President George W. Bush endorsed Israel's plan to hold on to part of the West Bank in any final peace settlement with the Palestinians.