

Chautauqua Watershed Notes
January 31, 2010



It's hard to resist "helping" when you find a wild inhabitant of the Chautauqua Watershed, especially one as cute as this deer mouse, but unless hurt or injured, most animals can get along better without us interfering.

Biophilia in the Chautauqua Watershed
By Jeff Tome

I got the uneasy feeling that I was being watched as I sat in the basement contemplating cat litter boxes. There was no one else in the basement, not even a cat. A tiny bit of motion in the window caught my eye. Looking up, there was a toad in the window well eyeing me desperately. She was standing on her back legs, with her small front feet pressed on the glass above her head. She looked like a prison inmate longing to be free. I ran up the stairs, grabbed my boots and went out to rescue her, my little toad in distress. It was one of those warmish nights with temperatures hovering in the low forties, but her body felt cold. I brought the toad in to show my wife and son while I decided what to do with her.

Should I take her in for the winter? I could keep her alive on worms and crickets from the pet store. Should I leave her out in the cold, knowing that a good cold snap couldn't be far away? Should I call someone who would care for it?

In the end, I decided the toad was obviously OK outside. She wouldn't be wandering around on a warm winter day if she couldn't take care of herself. I let her out in the bushes in the yard and hoped she would find a good place to stay when the world froze up again.

It's a hard thing to do. When we find animals in the wild that seem to be out of place, or in harm's way, it is natural to want to help them. The famous naturalist E.O. Wilson called this natural connection and sympathy we feel with animals biophilia.

It is such a natural instinct that many people call me with concerns. "A Hawk is eating all the birds at my birdfeeder! How do I stop it?" "There is a family of ducks in a parking lot. How do we get them to the lake?" "There are turtles on the road, how do we

keep them from getting run over?” “There are birds nesting on my porch. How can I keep from disturbing them?”

We have a natural instinct to care for and nurture wildlife, often unneeded. Most times, animals can care for themselves. Toads will find their own place to spend the winter. Turtles will keep getting back onto the warm road they love. Hawks need to eat, too and nesting birds raise babies in a month or so. Unless they are hurt or injured, most animals can get along better without us than they can with us interfering.

As I write this, many of the children in your life are probably connected to the entire universe through their computer, TV or fancy telephone. They have a world at their fingertips that no one could have imagined even a few years ago. Any information, any song, any video can be seen, digested and forgotten in minutes. Information flits through their lives faster than migrating birds through the trees. As they get more and more connected to the universe, their connection to the world outside their door gets weaker. Kids today spend less time sledding, snow fort building, and exploring than when I was a kid. On a winter day off from school, many neighborhoods that would have been teeming with children a few years ago are empty.

The children are inside, texting friends, playing video games and having fun, but they are missing something. They are not making the connections to the world that many of us made when we were kids. They don't see the hawk flying down to eat a squirrel or the rabbit munching on the blackberries. They think that squirrels hibernate, since they aren't outside to see them frolicking in the trees all winter long.

Children's new connection to all matter of technology has been dubbed videophilia. For many, it means a divorce from the reality of the natural world. It means a lack of understanding that the earth's natural systems support all life on earth, not just people, but snakes and worms and toads at the window. I wonder, if a toad comes to the window, will they notice? More important, if they do notice, will they care?

The mission of the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is to preserve and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. Persons, businesses and organizations are encouraged to join the CWC by calling 716-664-2166 or joining online at chautauquawatershed.org.