



Thriving ecosystem lurking in Spencer's Pond

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You could pass within chirping distance of the wondrous world that is Spencer's Pond a thousand times and not know it's there.

Even if you live in Langford, it's possible you have no idea of the thriving ecosystem encompassing the roughly 1.5 acres that exists in near obscurity off Leigh Road between the Trans-Canada Highway and Goldstream Avenue, not far from the downtown core.

Rob Bowen, however, knows more about the seasonal pond and the diversity of wildlife that exists there than most people could imagine.

The area undergoes dramatic changes as the seasons turn, transforming from a body of water you can canoe in during a good part of the year to an area that almost completely dries up typically late August before beginning to fill again in October.

Bowen and his family lived in the last house on Leigh Road leading up to the pond for four years, before selling his property last year, along with the other 15 Leigh Road residents, to the City of Langford to make way for the Spencer Road interchange.

"We were looking for a natural environment when we bought the house," said Bowen, who does geoscience and geospatial consulting for Diversified Scientific Solutions. "We thought it would be beneficial for our two kids" (one with special needs).

Bowen spent countless hours, dip-net in hand, collecting data, videotaping underwater activities and monitoring the weather station he set up to catalogue seasonal changes.

He can show you where the water rises as the seasons change, how much it rises and produce a drawing he made that maps out the differences.

Bowen has put the information he's gathered on a website, and made a CD of his research, photos and findings available to Langford City staff.

He's a strong believer in the importance of connecting kids of all ages with the natural world around them, as evidenced by the field trips he's organized for students from Ruth King elementary and Spencer middle school, which practically borders Spencer's Pond.

"The kids loved it and learned at the same time," he said.

What Bowen has painstakingly catalogued is an area teeming with wildlife that has managed to remain unscathed despite the proximity of development around it, in large part because of the buffer the surrounding forest provides.

Although there are no fish because of the period when it dries up, Spencer's Pond is home to an assortment of amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals and insects.

The thriving amphibian population includes salamanders, an abundance of Pacific tree frogs, and a large contingent of red-legged frogs, which are blue-listed.

The red-legged frogs begin their life as eggs in the water before moving to the surrounding forest to forage for food.

The deafening chorus of tree frogs at night in the spring during mating season is quite something to hear, says Bowen before playing a recording he made as audible proof.

"It used to be the same at the pond near Fulton Road," Bowen points out. "The population has been impacted significantly since the development went in around it."

The much-larger American bullfrog, which has plagued some nearby lakes in recent years, has no home at Spencer's Pond, however.

That's because their tadpole stage lasts almost a year, so they can't survive when the pond dries up in summer, Bowen notes.

Similarly, although insects like damselflies, backswimmers, dragonflies, giant water bugs, diving beetles, water scorpions, caddisflies, water boatmen and mayflies proliferate, Spencer's Pond is almost mosquito-free, once again due to the seasonal drying cycle.

Snakes, raccoons, herons and kingfishers are just a few of the creatures that take advantage of the insect buffet, joined by deer and otters from the nearby forest.

"You can hear the owls communicating at dusk," Bowen says, wondering how the interchange will impact the pond. "As Langford becomes more dense, animals concentrate in the remaining areas."

Bowen believes Langford has an extraordinary opportunity to create something special at Spencer's Pond.

"It's an incredible network of ecology, an incredibly efficient ecosystem," he says. "Langford could turn it into something like the Swan Lake interpretive centre ... the potential is there, the schools are nearby and it's so close at hand."

The City has long recognized that Spencer's Pond is a significant natural feature, said Langford clerk administrator Rob Buchan.

"It's our intent to keep out of it," Buchan said. "Without question, we're going to look after it.

"We're well aware of Rob Bowen's passion for Spencer's Pond and the work he's done. We're delighted to have that resource. Some of the best information we get is from our residents."

Buchan said educational partnerships with the schools, trails and boardwalks and information kiosks at Spencer's Pond are all possibilities council will discuss.

"It's a delightful spot," Buchan said. "There may be an opportunity to do something very special there."

Langford is hiring a parks co-ordinator to help address areas like Spencer's Pond where Langford wants to put more effort in, Buchan added.

"Council wants more emphasis on that," he said.

For more on Spencer's Pond, check out the website at www.spencerspond.ca.
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