



IN PRAISE OF MESSES

In one of my earliest essays, I informed my readership, “When I grow up, I want to be a housewife.” This composition, now a source of much hilarity, is framed for posterity. I should note that even in third grade, I had no penchant for tidiness. Being a housewife was about making messes—baking cookies, craft projects, wildflower bouquets. Tidiness is more important to me now than it was then, though it remains well down my list of priorities. As for messes, my appreciation has only grown.

One species comes first to mind when I think about the importance of messiness—red-backed salamanders. Why? Let me explain. On a couple of nights each spring, I am treated to a migration spectacle as the salamanders emerge from their hibernaculum. I first discovered this phenomenon when I headed out one evening to help migrating spotted salamanders cross the road. When I opened my door, I found several red-backed salamanders on my doorstep. A dozen more were climbing the flashing skirt below the siding. As I tried to make my way to the car, I found myself, and then the car, surrounded by red-backed. The spotted salamanders would have to rely on other assistants that night.

I have since learned that the pebble drain around my house is a popular red-backed hibernaculum. Every autumn, hundreds of these salamanders slither down between the peastones to get below the frostline. I try not to miss their arrival. It

happens on a rainy night in late September or early October. Each spring, the migration reverses on a warm rainy night in late April or early May.

If you don’t know red-backed salamanders, ask a kid who loves the woods to introduce you. They can be readily found by looking (carefully) under forest debris. These salamanders are slim and shiny and move like quicksilver. They come in various color morphs, but most commonly, they have a band of rusty red down their backs and a gray salt-and-pepper belly. While the largest are about four inches long, the smallest are likely to be the tiniest amphibians you will ever see, small enough to stretch out on a penny.

In science class, we learned that amphibians lay their eggs in the water. Aquatic tadpoles or gilled larvae hatch from these eggs and then metamorphose into adults, many of which are terrestrial. Red-backed are the dragons of the salamander world. The females lay their eggs in a moist nook, say inside a rotting log, and guard them until they hatch into miniature adults. This takes two months, during which time the female eats only the rare and careless invertebrate that blunders into her lair.

There are a lot of these salamanders. A study at the Hubbard Brook Experimental Station in New Hampshire found that the biomass of these salamanders was more than double that of all the birds combined. Unless you are on safari in the realm beneath rocks and logs, however, these

salamanders are seldom seen. They live in the leaf litter where they feed and feed upon the many who prowl that life-dense zone.

The emergence of the red-backed from their wintering zones beneath the frost line coincides with the beginning of the growing season, the time when the attention of home-makers turns eagerly to outdoor spaces. As I scan my yard and plan outdoor beautification, I do so with the salamanders in mind. Whenever I am tempted to eliminate messes, these little salamanders remind me that the entire landscape is inhabited by creatures earnestly living their unseen lives.

If puttering in gardens brings you joy, fear not! When thoughtfully contrived, messes can be beautiful and can shelter and feed more species than natural untidiness. Resources on wildlife-friendly landscaping abound for those of you who wish to take an active role in habitat improvement.

Here are a few basics:

- **Limit lawns and mowing.** A yard with a small lawn and pathways between natural

meadows will include far more native residents.

- **Go native.** Native trees, shrubs, and flowers support far more insects, birds, and other life.
- **Plant shrubs.** Shrubs are appreciated by many creatures, and native shrubs are the best choices. If shrubs are good, thickets are better. A proper thicket will be alive with birds throughout the year. It may also shelter rabbits, foxes, and weasels. And red-backed salamanders, of course.
- **Don't burn your brush pile.** Brush piles may look messy to us, but they are home, sweet home to other creatures. If you find your brush pile unattractive, maybe hide it behind your thicket?

I won't see my red-backed neighbors again until the rainy night when they head back to their winter home. I will enjoy imagining them all summer, though, in the wild, messy places that are my favorite parts of the landscape.

