

# A Day in the Life of a Red-Legged Frog Migration Volunteer

By Barbara Quinn

Dusk hadn't even arrived when the crew leader for Thursday, St. Johns neighbor Jeff Booth, arrives in his pickup. We drive across the St. Johns bridge to Linnton and he shifts down sharply to begin the steep climb up a narrow road overlooking the river to a destination house where supplies are stored for nightly volunteers. We load the back of the truck with 5 gallon buckets and drive to our rendezvous points, a Linnton road ascending from Highway 30 and a lower road adjacent to the wet-

lands where migrating frogs are heading. Buckets are unloaded and as dusk falls, we don reflective vests and headlamps and begin unrolling "the curtain" a 200 ft. long cloth attached to the guardrail that temporarily befuddles the migrating red-legged frogs long enough to catch them—usually. The frogs' drive to reach the wetlands below to procreate is so powerful and single-minded that the curtain will eventually be overcome as they scale it or find a way under it. Several of the arriving volunteers patrol the curtain. My assignment is the 80 ft. section of road nearest Highway 30 with no curtain



and a steep embankment above and below it—a free-for-all for the instinct-driven little amphibians. My job should I care to accept it, is to stop frogs from reaching the highway by catching them and placing them in a bucket to be later be shuttled by pickup down the hill past the road, highway and two active rail tracks safely to the ponds below. The red-leggeds only move after dark and only in certain weather conditions. It must be rainy or at least wet and warm, around 45 degrees. My eyes sweep the road to perceive any movement in the twilight though the frogs will freeze if they sense danger. And move the do. Faster than one would guess. When I see a dark, leaping shape sprinting toward the highway, I rush to intercept, only to watch the critter divert sideways into a roadside puddle, where he watches me intently with only his head visible. I easily scoop up my first catch of the night. As our buckets fill with a dozen or so frogs, a volunteer lifts the lid and carefully examines each frog

while another volunteer records its sex. I end up catching around 20 frogs over a couple hours and meet some interesting volunteers before bumping a ride home. Interestingly, the frogs started moving early this year. December 6th, in fact, saw a virtual stampede of the critters with 380 frogs caught on that night alone necessitating calls to all volunteers for help. There were literally frogs falling off the steep embankment onto the highway. Every animal caught counts because red-legged frogs are in "sensitive" status in Oregon due to rapidly declining numbers. They are endangered in California. The main reasons are urbanization, habitat loss, sensitivity to contaminants, and most relevant in Linnton, road mortality. The effort to help the migrating frogs started in 2013 when neighbors, Rob Lee and Shawn Looney, noticed massive numbers of frogs moving on the roads at night and became concerned with the numbers of deaths due to autos. They enlisted Jane Hartline of Sauvie Island and together the citizen naturalists organized volunteers in an effort to help the frogs safely reach the wet-

land until a better solution can be reached. Grant monies are being sought to create ponds on the hillside above the highway that may keep the frogs from being killed on the roads. Other solutions have been discussed, but as Sue Beilke, a volunteer biologist with Oregon Dept. of Fish and Wildlife, points out, the wetlands below Forest Park are an important and rich habitat that has served the frogs for thousands of years and would be hard to replace. The deadly obstacles humans have put in their way are relatively new. To celebrate the end of the red-legged frog migration season, over 40 volunteers met at the Linnton Community Center on March 13 for a dinner of homemade chili, salad and wine. This year, the spirited participants formed teams assigned one day of the week. Each team's leader monitored weather conditions and signaled for volunteers as needed. Some volunteered many nights, some only a few, and some remained on standby for the entire season. Nonetheless, all were welcomed and gathered to celebrate the grand total of 990 frogs safely moved down to the wetland and back up to the forest again. Team leaders will monitor the roads during prime conditions for another few nights to make sure there are no late-to-the-party frogs. All said, it was a successful season and volunteers are hopeful that less mortality means a more sustained population of red-legged frogs in the area.



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