Good Stewards

Spring is lively in the woods surrounding HHMI’s Janelia Farm Research Campus in Ashburn, Virginia. White-tailed deer rustle fallen leaves, pileated woodpeckers drum persistently overhead, and gray tree frogs trill in the treetops. But on one cloudy May afternoon, the sounds of nature are muffled by the cries of discovery. “Hey, Larry,” comes the call, “I found something!”

A team of more than 20 explorers—Janelia Farm employees and their nature-loving recruits—are combing the terrain: rolling aside logs, prodding leaf piles, and gently displacing stones. The reptiles and amphibians they seek out do little to announce themselves, but this is an observant group, and the finds come quickly.

“Hey, Larry, is this another worm snake?” someone asks as an energetic wriggle of pink and gray catches his eye. “It’s amazing what you find if you just flip things over.” Another participant announces he’s found a frog—a pickerel, he guesses, judging by the spotty skin. Moments later, a salamander sighting evokes a flurry of activity as a group peers into the stream waiting for its yellow tail to reappear.

Larry Mendoza, Janelia Farm’s biosafety and laser safety officer, scurries to each find. Mendoza is president of the Virginia Herpetological Society and a co-founder of Janelia’s Nature Club, through which he has gathered this crew for the second in a series of herpetological surveys of the Janelia Farm grounds.

Reptiles and amphibians are particularly sensitive to environmental pressures, so monitoring the snakes, lizards, frogs, salamanders, and turtles that inhabit this land helps reveal the health of the local ecosystem, Mendoza explains. As future surveyors begin to track population changes over time, the data will become even more valuable. Just as important, adds Mendoza, is ensuring the event is educational and fun.

Many of the scientists on the excursion have come recently to Janelia Farm and want to learn more about the local ecology. “We had very few reptiles of any kind in Seattle,” observes Matthew Iadanza, a member of Tamir Gonen’s structural biology lab, which relocated from the University of Washington last year. Others are here hoping to foster their children’s curiosity, and some of the day’s best finds—a slender water snake, an unusually vibrant box turtle—come from the group’s youngest naturalists.

“I walked right by that turtle,” Mendoza says. “That’s why you’ve always got to bring kids!”

After three and a half hours, the team has located 33 animals representing 11 different species, and Mendoza declares the survey a success. He is particularly excited by the 15 eastern box turtles. The species may be threatened in Virginia because of loss of habitat, and Mendoza says their prevalence indicates good stewardship of this land.

Mendoza has recorded the location, time, and discoverer of each find for inclusion in the Herpetological Society’s biannual publication, Catesbeiana. All participants will be asked to review the manuscript, he tells the group. As they disband, he reminds the team of upcoming Nature Club events—more herpetological surveys, bird walks, and perhaps a tour of insect life led by a resident entomologist. “We have 689 acres here at Janelia,” he says. “That’s a lot of land—a lot of opportunity.”

—Jennifer Michalowski

WEB EXTRA: For a sampling of what the naturalists found during their outing, see the audio slideshow at www.hhmi.org/bulletin/fall2012.