

Not just rubble and puddles

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Soon frogs, turtles, and snakes will be seeking safe places to survive the winter. All creatures have their favourite places to overwinter but some of the sites they choose

may surprise you.

In Manitoba's Interlake, snakes will head below the frost line through cracks in the limestone bedrock. Along the Seine River, you may have noticed old piles of concrete and rubble that were dumped along the riverbank in years past. Today, some of these rubble piles are used as hibernacula (winter dens) by local garter snakes.

Chorus frogs, wood frogs, and tree frogs are freeze-tolerant. They can survive being partly or entirely frozen so they don't have to get below the frost line. They can overwinter under leaf litter, logs, and rocks in ordinary city yards. Frogs are very fond of my yard. One frosty September day, a school group found over 100 chorus frogs there in only 15 minutes. Most were tucked between the soil and the wooden borders of flower beds.

Some turtles spend the winter on the bottom of ponds or rivers, as we learned in grade school. But some species don't actually hibernate so you may see them moving slowly around under the winter ice.

Many years ago, I attended a presentation by a herpetologist from the Toronto Zoo. He told us how he marked the shell of a turtle and followed it to its overwintering site — a small puddle. It did not support any wetland plants. It did not appear on any map. Based on appearance, it would not be considered worthy of conservation. It was simply a puddle.

The following spring, the herpetologist returned to the puddle to see if his turtle survived the winter. Each day he watched new turtles leave the puddle until the one he had marked finally emerged. He was amazed at the large number of turtles that had overwintered in this one small puddle.

That story stuck with me. I began to look at puddles through fresh eyes. I visited puddles in the fields near my house to listen for frogs each spring. As soon as the snow melted, the barren fields came to life with frogs, invertebrates, ducks, and geese.

Almost every undeveloped piece of land in Winnipeg has puddles in low spots. Are they just puddles? Or, are they crucial winter habitat for turtles and frogs?

We won't know until next spring.



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