

Backyard Tick Project Crawls into Existence



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BY JASON HILL

You see them every spring: articles announcing the growing menace of tick-borne diseases to human health. The headlines alone can induce a wriggling sensation beneath the cuff of your sock. By some accounts, the number of bacterial, viral, and sporezoan infections originating from tick bites has more than doubled in the last two decades. Lyme disease, tularemia, and spotted fever are just a few of the possible outcomes when ticks sink their mouthparts into people and pets.

Against this backdrop of foreboding, it's easy to understand the motivation behind efforts to control backyard ticks with conventional pesticides or organic sprays. Barbecues without babesiosis are always better!

But does spraying your yard for ticks unintentionally reduce local insect numbers in the midst of a global insect decline? Could the practice be

killing insects that feed our wild birds, pollinate our food and flowers, and eat undesirable pests such as mosquitoes and aphids? And does backyard tick control even work? These questions have received little attention in the peer-reviewed scientific literature; however, their importance increases each year as New England gets warmer and wetter with climate change, creating more favorable conditions for ticks.

This past summer, the Upper Valley Backyard Tick Project crawled into existence to gather data that will help landowners make informed pest management decisions. Thanks to the hard work of my incredible teammates, Amber and Hannah, we were able to survey 71 properties throughout the Upper Valley, almost a quarter of the nearly 300 properties we were invited to visit. We made two visits to each property, surveyed for ticks, and

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performed non-lethal sampling for insects and other invertebrates. For properties that used chemical controls, we typically surveyed on the day before and the day after treatments were applied.

We walked about 19 miles of survey transects across those lawns, collected 92 adult American Dog Ticks (*Dermacentor variabilis*) and 48 Black-legged Ticks, also known as Deer Ticks (*Ixodes scapularis*). In addition, we counted and released over 9,000 other invertebrates (such as insects, snails, and spiders) from more than 2,000 shrubs and trees located along the lawn edges. I will take a closer look at the data this winter and seek grant-funding for another year of sampling. So stay tuned, folks, and thank you to all landowners who generously participated in the inaugural year of our research. **FN**

**JIM GOETZ****Caribbean Conservation Coordinator**

Earlier this year, VCE welcomed Jim Goetz as our Caribbean Conservation Coordinator. Jim has extensive scientific experience in the Caribbean, where he worked with species such as Bicknell's Thrush, Black-Capped Petrel, and Golden Swallow on Hispaniola and directed a forest conservation program in Haiti. For VCE, Jim will direct our capacity-building efforts for Caribbean colleagues and NGOs. He will also spearhead an update to the International Bicknell's Thrush Conservation Group's action plan. Jim lives in Upstate New York where he is working on completing his Ph.D. at Cornell University!

**TONI LUFF****Administrative Coordinator**

Since joining the VCE staff in May, Administrative Coordinator Toni Luff has approached her work with a blend of warmth and efficiency that reflects her nearly two decades of experience as a stay-at-home mom. On a typical day, she might field phone inquiries, record minutes for a committee, troubleshoot a plumbing problem, and renegotiate a vendor contract—all before lunchtime. With just a few months under her belt, Toni led the year's most energized staff meeting, compelling many of the participants to continue to meet (for fun!) after the session had officially adjourned. Although her effectiveness as a facilitator may be related to her generosity with chocolates, it's also a product of the focus and preparation that she brings to all of her work. Thank you, Toni, for enhancing the office experience!

**RACHEL MCKIMMY****ECO AmeriCorps Member**

VCE is thrilled to welcome our newest ECO AmeriCorps member, Rachel McKimmy! Rachel is joining us as a second-year ECO AmeriCorps member, having just completed her first service year in the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation's Clean Water Initiative Program. Originally from Northern California, she moved to Vermont two years ago after completing her B.S. in Environmental Studies and minor in creative writing at the University of Michigan. Rachel is serving as VCE's Communications and Outreach Coordinator, where her love of nature and writing skills will support numerous projects. Welcome aboard, Rachel! **FN**