



Creature Feature: Spring 2009

By W. Scott Douglas

Spring Peeper (*Pseudacris crucifer*)



When I was a child growing up in northern Vermont, I spent as much of my leisure time outside as possible. My favorite activity was wading through streams and ponds observing, catching and playing with the local fauna. Frogs supplied endless hours of entertainment due to their number and the fact that they responded pretty well to at least temporary captivity. Tadpoles were my favorite, and I became a local expert on where you could find egg masses in the spring. Spring in VT is particularly special because the winters are so cold, dark and seemingly endless. I eagerly

waited for the days when the creeks would run swollen with snow melt and the fecund smell of wet earth permeated everything. I would listen for the sleigh bell chorus of frogs from my favorite wooded wetlands and head out with a bucket and a dip net to collect the gelatinous egg masses. Now that I've grown up, I still feel a special pull when the frogs start up their springtime chorus from the pond next door. And rather than being annoyed with the sometimes deafening sound, I lay in my bed with the window open and smile.

The most common chorus frog in the Watershed is the Spring Peeper. Their high peeping call is just a little bit lower in pitch than a dog whistle, and consists of single notes or trills. When a population emerges from under logs and loose bark in springtime, the males gather near a body of water and actively advertise for mates by calling. When conditions are right, the frog calls blend together, sounding like sleigh bells. The best breeding habitat for Peepers is wooded wetlands and vernal ponds. The reason for this is that these bodies of water are dry at least part of the year, so they do not harbor predators which would eat the tadpoles. Once the tadpoles have grown up and left the pond (eight weeks), they search out meals of beetles, ants, flies and spiders from woodlands and overgrown fields. Peepers are nocturnal, using darkness to hide from herons, snakes, rodents and other predators. Despite their loud calls, the frogs themselves are quite small; they could sit comfortably on a dime. They are considered tree frogs, and have little sticky pads on their feet that help them grip branches as they climb.

Adult peepers are grey green brown to light brown, with a characteristic cross marking on their back, which gives them their Latin name. Like all amphibians, they are sensitive to

water quality, particularly in their egg and tadpole stage. Wooded wetlands and vernal ponds that are well buffered and surrounded with vegetation are critical for reproductive success. While the little guys will use almost any body of water to breed (even puddles and roadside ditches), the eggs laid in these places will almost certainly not make it to maturity due to either premature drying up or toxins from road runoff. If you want to “go frogging”, follow your ears! Bring a flashlight and wear waders. As you approach the pond, the frogs will become silent, but if you are patient and quiet, they will start up again. Look in the brush and reeds, just about a meter or so off the ground, and search for their throat sacs expanding and contracting as they sing. Jump, jump, jump little froggy!