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Natural History Notes



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THE SPRING PEEPER



The arrival of spring is announced by renewed activities of many living things. Birds migrate north to nest, insects emerge from their cocoons, fishes move onto their spawning grounds, the forest turns green and plants begin to flower. The world is alive with the sights and sounds of plants and animals busy carrying out life's activities, each in its own unique way. We are all familiar with the voice of the Spring Peeper as he rings out winter and announces the arrival of a new season.

This large voice comes from the Spring Peeper, a tiny frog that can sit on your thumb with room to spare. Only the males sing, usually from marsh lowlands, ponds or lakes. The males appear on the breeding grounds when the temperature reaches the 50's. At first the males sing both day and night, but as spring progresses they limit their singing to the late afternoon and evening. With the calls of other frogs, this chorus is almost deafening.

Frogs were among the first terrestrial animals to vocalize. They have vocal cords and a voice box similar to higher animals. The frog's mouth is closed during the calling, and air is pushed back and forth through the voice box as the throat membrane expands like a large bubble. This membrane also acts as a resonator and the call of the tiny Peeper can be heard as far as one mile away.

The Spring Peeper is difficult to spot because of its small size and also because it hides partially submerged in ponds or wet places, usually under leaves or twigs. Frogs also have good vision and will see an intruder

approaching and hide. The best time to catch a glimpse of this tiny frog is at night, using a dim light. Quietly approach a pond and listen for the call. Then shine your light over the water and you will see the inflated white throats expanding and contracting as they sing.

Peepers are yellowish brown with a distinct darker "X" on their backs. There is also a V-shaped mark between the eyes. Their undersides are whitish and may be mottled with brown spots. The males are considerably smaller than the females.

The eggs are laid in water surrounded by a viscid substance and are attached to debris in the water. Each female lays from 800 to 1500 eggs, 1/12 inch in diameter. Depending upon temperature, the eggs hatch in six to twelve days into the "pollywog" or tadpole stage. They will grow to about an inch in length as they feed on algae. After about eight weeks they begin to metamorphose (change) into frogs and take up residence on land.

Frogs and other amphibians are most interesting from an evolutionary viewpoint. They are the first animals to take up residence on dry land. They are the intermediate stage between fishes and reptiles. Part of their life is spent on water and part on land.

These creatures are very important in nature's cycle. The eggs and tadpoles are food for various aquatic animals while the adult frogs devour hundreds of mosquitoes, blackflies and other insects.

As summer progresses the adult Peepers will be found in bushes, grass and trees as high as 75 feet above the ground. As cold weather and winter near, they hibernate in ponds and streams under leaves or moss. They emerge each spring but do not mature to reproduce until they are three or four years old. They will then announce spring with the familiar pe-ep, pe-ep, pe-ep.