



Spring Peeper

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Ariel Lepito/USFWS

Spring Peeper (*Pseudacris crucifer*)

The song of this tiny harbinger is a welcome sound each year to those who long for the coming of spring. Actually, “winter peeper” might be a more appropriate name for this frog in most of North Carolina, for it usually breeds in winter, or even in autumn in the more southern parts of its range. The taxonomic status of this elfin amphibian has been widely debated. It resembles the treefrogs (*Hyla*) in overall body form, but studies have led most authorities to place it with the chorus frogs (*Pseudacris*) because of its similar genetic makeup, small size, call, winter breeding season and largely terrestrial habits.

Description

One of our smallest frogs, the spring peeper has a tan, brownish, grayish or pale orange dorsal ground color with a prominent dark cross or X-shaped marking in the middle of the back, hence the species name *crucifer*. The belly is whitish, yellowish or cream colored, sometimes with small spots or mottling. Males have dark throats. The skin is relatively smooth. The toes are tipped with enlarged, adhesive discs that aid in climbing. The well-known call is a shrill, bird-like “peep,” with an upward slur, usually repeated about once per second. Warmer temperatures normally result in more rapid calling. A variety of less familiar trill-like calls may also be uttered when the frogs are cold or when males are competing for favorite calling spots.

History and Status

The spring peeper is one of North Carolina’s most common amphibians. Urbanization and other forms of habitat destruction have eliminated some populations, but the species is still abundant in most wetland habitats. It is not listed under any category of special protection.

Habitats & Habits

This frog occurs in a wide variety of habitats, but it is usually associated with woodlands. Most successful breeding takes place in ephemeral wetlands such as woodland pools, but ditches, large puddles, flooded woods or fields, swamps, and even permanent sites such as farm ponds may also be used. Peepers congregate in large numbers at favorable sites during the breeding season. They may travel considerable distances in order to reach breeding sites. They are chiefly nocturnal, and most movement, as well as the most intensive breeding activity, takes place on rainy nights. The sound of a large breeding chorus at close range can be deafening.

After the breeding season, spring peepers become secretive to the point of seeming to vanish altogether. They live amid dense undergrowth or beneath surface litter,

The spring peeper is known for its shrill, bird-like “peep.”



Jeff Beane

Range and Distribution

The spring peeper ranges over much of eastern North America, from Quebec and the Maritime Provinces south to north-central Florida and west to eastern Manitoba and Texas. It has been introduced into Cuba. It occurs throughout North Carolina, except for the Outer Banks.

Range Map



Spring Peeper Range Map

Spring Peeper

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Habitats & Habits (continued)

sometimes far from the breeding ponds. They are primarily terrestrial but may ascend small shrubs. Occasional specimens may be encountered abroad in moist woodlands or crossing roads on rainy nights during the summer, but as a rule these frogs are difficult to find during the hotter months. They may call occasionally during cool periods outside the breeding season.

Peepers feed mostly on small, live insects, which they locate visually and catch with the aid of their large, sticky tongue. Like most other frogs, they cannot see stationary objects and will feed only on moving prey. They are preyed upon by many creatures, including mammals, birds, snakes and even large spiders. The eggs and tadpoles are eaten by aquatic insects, crayfish, turtles, salamanders, fish and many other predators.

Human Interactions

Although most North Carolinians have probably heard the spring peeper's exuberant call at one time or another, and many are very familiar with it, the frogs themselves are very seldom seen except by those who deliberately seek them out. Huge numbers are killed by automobiles on rainy nights during the breeding season. Peepers normally fare poorly in captivity and are seldom kept as pets. Since spring peepers spend much of their time in upland habitats, protection of upland habitat near breeding pools is required to maintain this species.

For More Information/References

- Dorcas, Michael E., Steven J. Price, Jeffrey C. Beane, and Sarah Cross Owen. *The Frogs and Toads of North Carolina: A Field Guide and Recorded Calls*. (N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, 2007.)
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- Conant, Roger, and Joseph T. Collins. *A Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians of Eastern and Central North America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991).
- Martof, Bernard S., William M. Palmer, Joseph R. Bailey and Julian R. Harrison III. *Amphibians and Reptiles of the Carolinas and Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

Little Grass Frog
(0.5-0.75 in)

Spring Peeper
(0.75-1.5 in)

Bullfrog
(3.5-8 in)



Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Amphibia

Order: Anura

Family: Hylidae

Average Size

Length: 0.75 to 1.5 inches; females are slightly larger than males.

Food

Mostly insects and other small arthropods.

Breeding/Young

Males congregate in breeding sites—usually ephemeral wetlands—in winter or early spring and call to attract females. Like other frogs, a male peeper grasps the female's body with his forearms and rides on her back (this is called amplexus), fertilizing her eggs externally as she lays them. Females lay several hundred eggs, which are usually attached individually to submerged objects. Eggs hatch in a few days. Tadpoles feed on algae, dead plant and animal matter, and other organic material and metamorphose in three to four months. Young spring peepers resemble adults and are normally sexually mature by the following breeding season.

Life Expectancy

Unknown; apparently short-lived. Captives have lived three to four years.



Credits

Originally written by Jeff Beane; updated by Deborah Robertson, Wake County Parks, Recreation & Open Space, Jeff Hall, NCWRC, 2018.