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The Frog Chorus Begins

With no playoff hockey to distract us this spring, we can take full advantage of another equally entertaining spectacle happening at wetlands across the Kawarthas. Countless thousands of frogs are caught up in the cause of procreation, and the show is well worth taking in. Each month, from April through June, will bring us a different set of actors, the entire cast consisting of nine frog species and one toad.

The first frogs of spring usually begin to call around the middle of April, when evening temperatures have warmed to at least 8 C. The calls, given only by the males, serve to attract females and, in the case of some species like bullfrogs, to advertise ownership of territory. When a receptive female arrives, the male clasps her waist from the back and fertilizes the eggs as they are voided from her body. All of the frog species that breed in early spring anchor their egg masses to vegetation below the water surface, where the eggs will not be killed by ice formation on a cold night.

The first species to break the long silence of winter is usually the striped chorus frog. Only about two centimetres long, chorus frogs call day and night from shallow, often temporary bodies of water in open areas. They sing a vibrant, often repeated "*creek*" with strongly rolled r's. The species is notoriously difficult to actually see, since it usually conceals itself in clumps of vegetation.

A few days after the chorus frog, the similar-sized spring peeper makes its entry. The peeper is one species in nature that more than lives up to its name. It produces an incredibly loud, high-pitched chirp or "peep" that seems about 100 times bigger than the tiny fellow producing the sound. A full chorus of peepers at close proximity is almost physically painful to the ears. Even hours afterwards, the chorus can continue to resound in your head. Peepers are abundant in the Kawarthas and can be found in most any wetland with trees or shrubs either in the water or nearby.

In more wooded areas, the aptly named wood frog starts calling at about the same time of the month as the peeper. Resembling a masked thief, this handsome frog produces a short chuckle, almost as if it were doing an imitation of quacking ducks. Like the spring peeper, wood frogs return to their damp, woodland habitat once breeding duties are completed. It's not uncommon to see both of these species during a summer walk through the forest. The range of the wood frog extends all the way to the Arctic tundra, further north than any other frog species.

As late April rolls around, the less-than-flattering voice of the leopard frog joins the chorus. Its call is usually described as a rattling "snore", followed by a series of guttural chucks. Some parts of the call also sound like wet hands rubbing a balloon. Unlike the other three species which have spent the winter frozen solid in the leaf litter of the forest floor, leopard frogs hibernate on the bottom of ponds, lakes and rivers.

Frog calls are loudest during the first few hours after sunset but most species also advertise their presence during the day. The best conditions for hearing a full-blown amphibian chorus are mild, damp, windless nights that follow a period of rain. Evenings with light rain falling are especially good.

Actually watching a frog such as a spring peeper call, while hundreds of its brethren produce a deafening chorus all around you, is certainly one of the most memorable experiences

of spring. All you really need are patience and a good flashlight. Some of the frogs may fall silent when you first approach, but if you wait quietly the urge to sing will once again get the better of them. Carefully scan the floating plant debris, the sections of vegetation just above the water surface and the water itself. Keep in mind that peepers and chorus frogs are not much bigger than a bumblebee and drably colored. Fortunately, they distend their throat into an easily visible vocal sac which serves to amplify the sound. The vocal sacs of wood frogs are on the sides of the body. Wood frogs usually call as they float on the water, while peepers tend to sing from vegetation.

Learning the calls of our nine frogs and one toad is not difficult. The voice of each species is distinctive. As with birds, mnemonics are quite useful in committing each call to memory. The leopard frog snores; the peeper peeps like a toy horn; the wood frogs quacks like a duck; and the striped chorus frog sounds like a finger running over the small teeth of a comb. The Toronto zoo has an excellent Internet site where you can hear the calls and learn more about each species. Go to www.torontozoo.com/adoptapond/Frogs.asp.

On mild, rainy April nights, also keep an eye open for salamanders as they make their way over snow, ice, rock and pavement to breed in their ancestral ponds. Running a gauntlet of skunks, raccoons and automobiles, they are following an imprinted memory of their birthplace with its specific odors of mud and decaying vegetation. Three species are often seen crossing the road at this time of year. They are the spotted salamander (sometimes referred to as the yellow-spotted), the blue-spotted and the Eastern newt. Drive slowly along back roads that cross through low woodlands and treed, swampy areas. If you see salamanders on the road, get out and walk. Don't forget to bring your camera.

Some of my favorite locations for hearing amphibians include the wetlands along County Rd 24 north of County Rd 18, the University Road swamp just north of County Rd 4, the Mackenzie House Pond (enter off Pioneer Road) at Trent University and the rail-trail between Trent University and Lakefield. For salamanders, you may want to try Millage Road on the south shore of Lovesick Lake.

It is unfortunate that any article on amphibians has to end on a sour note. However, with Earth Day this Friday, it would be irresponsible to leave people with the impression that all is well. Disease, pesticides, climate change and habitat loss are threatening fully one-third of the world's species of frogs, toads, newts and salamanders, according to the first global assessment of amphibians released last fall. 168 species may be already extinct. Locally, amphibians seem to be holding their own, at least for the time being. However, it is still extremely painful to realize that we are probably facing a future with far fewer species of these beautiful animals and their extraordinary lifestyles.

What to watch for this week:

April is fish-watching month par excellence. Usually by mid-April, walleye are spawning in rocky, fast-flowing stretches of water and along shoals in lakes. Look for them after dark at Lock 19 on Lansdowne St., along the causeway on Chemong Lake and below the pedestrian bridge in Young's Pt. Take along a strong-beamed flashlight. Watch for white suckers and yellow perch as well.

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