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Identify the amphibian chorus

Looks like a frog and quacks like a duck? You just heard a wood frog

Now is an excellent time to either review or learn for the first time the calls of our nine local frogs and one toad. Each month, from April through June, will bring us a different ensemble of amphibian voices, all of which can be easily identified with a little practise.



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

It is difficult to memorize animal calls just as pure sound. For most people, a memory aid or mnemonic is necessary. Fortunately, mnemonics have been developed for all our frog and toad species. For example, the leopard frog snores; the peeper peeps like a toy horn; and the wood frog quacks like a duck. For convenient home practise, numerous websites also have recordings of the calls. A great place to start is

www.torontozoo.com/adoptapond/Frogs.asp. You should also check out www.naturewatch.ca. Click on Frog-Watch and then "identifying frogs."

The first frogs of spring usually begin to call in early to mid-April, when evening temperatures have warmed to at least 8 C. This year, however, spring peepers and wood frogs were first heard on March 28, an extremely early date. 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. 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. Later breeders tend to lay egg masses that float on the surface.

Western chorus frog

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 such as fields. They sing a vibrant, often repeated "creek" with strongly rolled r's. The call is often likened to the sound of a thumbnail being drawn slowly over the teeth of a comb. The species is notoriously difficult to actually see, since it usually conceals itself in clumps of vegetation. Like the spring peeper, the chorus frog is a treefrog, with sticky toes, changeable colours, and an ability to climb. The female lays 500 to 1,500 eggs in loose, gelatinous clusters attached to submerged vegetation.

Spring Peeper

At about the same time as 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, penetrating chirp or "peep" that seems about 10 times bigger than the tiny fellow producing the sound. A full chorus of peepers at close proximity is almost physically painful to the ears. Peepers are abundant in the Kawarthas and can be found in most any wetland with trees, shrubs or cattails. They call mostly in the evening and at night. The eggs are laid singly in the water and are usually attached to aquatic plants.



TIM DYSON photo

bright green, brown, or gray. When the hour-long transformation is completed, the frog melts almost completely into the background. Eggs are laid in small clumps attached to vegetation.

Green Frog

Probably the most abundant frog in the Kawarthas, the green frog is superficially similar to the bullfrog. However, it has a ridge running down the back from behind each eye. These ridges are lacking in the bullfrog. Green frogs also tend to be extremely variable in colour. Fortunately, their call is quite distinctive. Beginning in late May, listen for a "gath-unk" sound that is often likened to the twang of a loose banjo string or rubber band. When a number of these frogs start calling in a chorus, it's almost like a group of people gulping air or hiccupping. Their eggs are laid at the surface in a floating mass of up to 5,000 eggs.

Mink Frog

A little known but exceptionally beautiful small frog, the mink frog is widespread in wetlands in the northern part of Peterborough County. It is very similar to the closely-related green frog, except for the markings on the hind legs. Once again, however, the call is totally unique. To most people, the mink frog's "cut-cut-cut" sound is reminiscent of two stones being struck together in rapid succession. A full chorus of mink frogs suggests the sound of horses' hooves on a cobblestone road. The mink frog is also reputed to smell like rotting onions which is supposedly similar to the smell of a mink. The eggs are laid in a globular mass measuring about 10 cm in diameter.

American Bullfrog

Bullfrogs are territorial breeders that gather in groups in large, permanent water bodies to give their deep "jug-o'-rum" call. From late May to the end of July, bullfrogs float on the water's surface and call throughout warm evenings, nights and early mornings. Males drive competitors away from their small piece of aquatic real estate while at the same time trying to attract females with their bellowing calls. Females lay up to 10,000 eggs in a floating mass that extends up to a metre across.

When and where

Frog calls are loudest during the first few hours after sunset, although many 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 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.

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RICK STANKIEWICZ photo

Wood Frog

In more wooded areas, the aptly named wood frog starts calling at about the same time as the peeper and chorus frog. Resembling a masked thief, this handsome frog produces a short, fairly high-pitched chuckle, almost as if it were doing an imitation of quacking ducks. The call has the same grating quality as that of the leopard frog (see below) but is produced in much shorter phrases. Wood frogs sing both day and night, since their breeding season only lasts for about two weeks. The female usually chooses the deepest part of the pond to lay her globular egg mass which contains 1000 eggs or more.

Leopard Frog

As mid- to late April rolls around, the less-than-flattering voice of the leopard frog joins the chorus. Although it's very difficult to describe the call in words, try to think of a rattling "snore", followed or interspersed with a series of guttural chucks. Some parts of the call almost sound like wet hands rubbing an inflated balloon. Leopard frogs have paired vocal sacs which protrude from

the side of the neck instead of from the throat. The females each produce a loose, oval egg mass that can contain up to 3,000 eggs.

American Toad

The long, fluid trills of the American toad are one of the most pleasant and typical sounds of late April through early May. Toads can be heard both day and night as they sing from marshes, temporary meltwater ponds, and even suburban backyard garden ponds. The high-pitched, musical trill, sounding similar to a musical whistle, can last up to 30 seconds. When more than one male is singing at a time, each individual will sing at a slightly different pitch. As the toad sings, it inflates its mottled, gray vocal sac, causing it to vibrate rapidly. At the breeding ponds, males may attempt to breed with anything that comes near them, including other male toads or the observer's rubber boots! Eggs are laid in two strings and can hatch in three to 12 days.

Pickerel Frog

Although similar in appearance to the leopard frog, the pickerel frog tends to

have squarish spots and a brown colouration. Leopard frogs, on the other hand, are greener with more rounded spots. The clincher, however, is that adult pickerel frogs have a patch of bright yellow or orange in the groin region or underside of the legs. Like its closely related cousin, the pickerel frog also has a snore-like call. However, it is shorter and has little carrying power. Pickerel frogs are the least common of our local frog species, with only a relative handful of reports on record. They are said to require cool, unpolluted water. Egg-laying habits are similar to the leopard frog.

Gray Treefrog

Usually beginning in late May, the slow, musical, bird-like trill of the gray treefrog or "tree toad" is delivered in two or three second bursts, almost sounding like a gentle machine gun. Males usually call from dusk to midnight but are occasionally heard during the day. Eggs are laid in small clumps attached to vegetation in the water. Don't let the name "gray" mislead you, however. These frogs have the amazing ability to match their background, be it