



John Byrd

SPRING PEEPER (*PSEUDACRIS CRUCIFER*) OBSERVATION GUIDE FOR HERPSCAPERS

by Ashley LaVere

INTRODUCTION:

Spring peepers are small, shy frogs that live in woodland and grassland habitat across central and southeast United States. Their namesake is derived from their sleigh-bell-like calls that can be heard in symphony during warm spring nights. Their small size and camouflage abilities prevents them from being seen outside the breeding season when their familiar calls give them away! Being amphibious they are often found near small ponds and swamps, feeding off of nearby beetles, flies, and spiders under the cloak of night in effort to avoid hungry predators such as snakes and birds. Though they prefer to spend their time on the ground, tucked under leaf litter, their flat, terminal toe pads allow them to grip onto and climb vegetation, so be sure to extend your searches upwards for more adventurous individuals! Their ability to perform gas exchange through their skin makes them sensitive to oils and chemicals so be sure that your hands are clean of lotions or bug sprays before attempting to handle them. To prevent drying out their skin it is good practice to wet your hands first!



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Here a spring peeper is making a tasty meal out of a long-legged insect!

DESCRIPTION

Spring peepers are generally around an inch in length (about the length of a paper clip) and only weigh 3 to 5 grams! They have smooth skin that ranges from tan-brown to green-gray, with a signature, but often imperfect "X" marking on their backs. Darker bands stripe down their fore and hind legs and a dark line between their eyes, adding the finishing touch to their overall tree-bark costume. If you are able to get a hand on these fast frogs and gently turn them over, you will see that they have a cream-colored belly. Spring peeper's smooth skin and powerful hind legs can make them hard to catch and hold on to, so if are handling them, be sure to do so near the ground in case they make a quick escape!



BEHAVIOR

During the cold winter months, spring peepers will hide under logs or behind loose bark and stay there in a state of torpor until the spring comes to unthaw their bodies and cue them to sing. When the warm spring nights roll in, spring peepers hop out with males and females gathering near a small pond or pool to begin the



An adult spring peeper takes a dip in the pool. Notice the signature "X" on the back of this individual.

performance. Males will sing in trios with the deepest-voiced frog starting the chorus, repeating their calls about twenty times per minute. The faster and louder they sing, the more likely they will attract a female who will seek out the male and the small male will mount and grip onto the back of the female, a behavior termed amplexus. It is in this stance that the female will lay eggs as the males fertilize them externally.

With ideal temperature and weather conditions, eggs will hatch in two days into tadpoles. These tadpoles will spend the next six to twelve weeks feeding on algae, fighting or hiding from predators, and growing arms and legs that will help them make the transition from their small aquatic nursery to their new, large adult home where they will live for, on average three to four years. Dependence

of spring peepers on wetland habitat both for living their adult lives as well as breeding has led to their vulnerability to expanding development and urban runoff. Although this species is not threatened across its range, as their habitat is being degraded or lost, some may struggle to locate suitable breeding ground as these sites are becoming dispersed, with distances between these sources becoming impossible for these paperclip sized frogs to travel.

LEARNING MORE:

Find out more about spring peepers using these books and websites to help guide your curiosities!

Books:

- 1) Peterson Field Guides – Reptiles and Amphibians – Eastern/Central North America, (1998) by Roger Conant/Joseph T. Collins. This book should always be within reach. There is also a Western Peterson Field Guide for reptiles and amphibians.
- 2) The Frogs and Toads of North America: A comprehensive Guide to Their Identification, Behavior, and Calls, (2009) by Lang Elliot, Carl Gerhardt, and Carlos Davidson. This book provides information on identification and behavior of frogs and toads across North America and comes with a CD to help learn their calls.
- 3) Amphibians and Reptiles of Georgia, (2008) edited by John B. Jensen, Carlos D. Camp, Whit gibbons, and Matt J. Elliott. This comprehensive work has an excellent overview on amphibian and reptile conservation and a thorough reference section for further study.

Websites:

- 1) <http://srelherp.uga.edu/herps.htm> -This site takes you to the Savanna River Ecology Lab. Here you will find outstanding photos and information on most of the frogs found in the Southeast.
- 2) <https://herpsofnc.org/> - This site takes you to the Amphibians and Reptiles of North Carolina website where they provide descriptions of herpetofauna found throughout the state, which also occur in many other southeastern states.
- 3) <https://www.nwf.org/Educational-Resources/Wildlife-Guide/Amphibians> - This website developed by The National Wildlife Federation provides descriptions of a variety of amphibians throughout the U.S.

