

SPRING PEEPERS, A VERY WELCOME CHORUS

By Tom Ryzewski

In the evenings, about this time of year, early March, I begin to go out back by the old stone wall bordering the woods and swamps behind my little farm to await one of the most enchanting springtime events, to hear the first peeps of the peeper frogs. To me, no sound is more joyously welcomed and evocative as the distant chorus of the first northern spring peepers, *Pseudacris crucifer crucifer*, as it echoes through the moist and fragrant air of the woods on a spring evening.

These astonishingly small, 1 inch long, chorus frogs have over-wintered, partially frozen with the aid of glucose in their tissues, under leaf litter, mosses and logs in the woods. Increasing temperatures have stirred them and triggered hormonal changes that cause an instinctive migration to nearby pools and ponds where the males begin to search for mates. Bodies of water large and small become amphibian singles' bars where males, using loud 1 second long whistling calls do their best to attract females that have also gathered there in the hopes of finding Mr.Right.

The spring peepers call is amazingly loud from such a small frog. It is produced by forcing air from the lungs over tiny vocal cords that vibrate at very high audio frequencies. The air then inflates a throat sac that actually functions like a radio speaker amplifying and directing the sound. The call from just one nearby frog is almost ear piercing and to be in the middle of hundreds of calling males is a gloriously deafening springtime moment. A single male may call as many as 4500 times in an evening, usually calling along with a group of other males for 15 to 30 minutes and then remaining silent for 5 to 10 minutes. The females seem to be attracted to the loudest calls, those coming from larger and perhaps more fit males carrying a better set of genes. Interestingly, there are a few non-calling scoundrels, called satellite males, that have the unmitigated gall to intercept and quickly mate with unsuspecting females who were on their way to good sounding males to whom they had been attracted. So even nice guy male frogs get stood up occasionally and sweetly innocent females can get stuck with a bum date!

In any event, one thing leads to another and a female will lay about 800 tiny eggs, the male clinging to her back will fertilize them externally and the eggs will hatch in about a week. The tiny tadpoles take 45 to 60 days to become adults, at least the ones that make it. Predation rates on eggs and tadpoles are very high by everything from dragonfly larvae to snakes. The lucky handful that survive will disperse to the woods and meadows to live almost unseen for up to 3 years, but, returning to the water each spring to be part of that beautiful chorus.

Start going out after dark as the days and evenings begin to warm up now that March is moving along. Listen quietly and patiently for the first peeps. Those distant voices that will mean the end of the long cold winter silence and the beginning of the glorious sounds of New England evenings in the many warm months to come. Listen and rejoice!