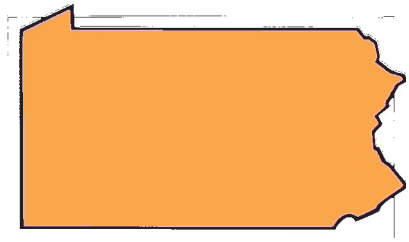
Spotted Salamander

Ambystoma maculatum

General characteristics. The spotted salamander is one of our more common salamanders, although it is not often seen because it prefers to live underground. It generally is considered nocturnal. It reaches adult sizes that range from six to nearly eight inches, equaling or slightly exceeding the Jefferson salamander in average size.

Identification. As might be imagined, large spots are a predominant means by which to identify this salamander. Two rows of yellow or orange spots run somewhat erratically the length of the body. Beginning on the head and near the eyes, the spots end at the tip of the tail. The spots on the head usually are orange even though the spots on the rest of the body could be yellow. The ground color ranges from black, to blue-black, to dark gray or dark brown. The belly is slate gray. A stout body begins with a round snout that is blunt and punctuated with large, dark eyes. There are 12 costal grooves.

Range. In Pennsylvania the range of the spotted salamander extends from border to border in all directions. Except for Florida, southern New Jersey and the Delmarva Peninsula, it extends over the eastern one-third of the country.



Habitat. The state's numerous hard-wood forests offer a potential home to this amphibian, providing a pond (which could be temporary) or other wetland is nearby. Hillsides and other areas around woodland ponds seem al-most irresistible. The spotted salamander spends most of its time beneath ground level, but also conceals itself in moist areas beneath moss-covered rocks or stones and among piles of leaves or other debris.

Reproduction. Breeding occurs in early spring with the advent of warm rains and rising air temperatures. Rainfall and the yearly warming trend encourages migration to nearby breeding ponds. Here, in shallow water and at night, pairs of spotted salamanders perform a dance of courtship that ultimately results in fertilized eggs being deposited by the female. The eggs are encased in masses that swell to measure from two to four inches in diameter. The masses, up to four of them per female, are compact and can be clear or milky in appearance. Each mass clings to submerged branches and other vegetation and contains an average of about 100 eggs.

Depending on water temperatures, the eggs hatch in one to two months. The larvae are light sandy or greenish yellow and dark spots sprinkle the back. A

dorsal fin extends over the back ending just above the front legs. The gills are lost and transformation takes place in two to four months. The spotted salamander returns to water during its second spring as a mature adult, ready to begin the cycle again.

Food. Like all salamanders, the spotted salamander is carnivorous. The majority of its hunting is done at night when it seeks to feed on worms, slugs, spiders and insects.