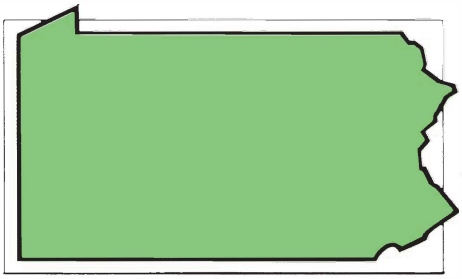
Spring Peeper

Hyla crucifer crucifer

General characteristics. One of the state's tree-climbing frogs, the spring peeper belongs to the family Hylidae, as do all the tree dwellers. The spring peeper is seldom seen except during the breeding season, even though it is perhaps our most abundant treefrog. Nonetheless, its habitual and easily recognized call makes this small woodland amphibian one of our most familiar frogs. It averages in length from three-fourths to 1 1/4 inches as an adult.

Identification. The most recognizable feature identifying the spring peeper is the large, dark, irregularly X-shaped mark in the middle of the back. A dark, modified Vee appears between the eyes, and the legs are barred with a dark color. The slender body is tan to light brown or grayish on the upper surface; the belly is light, becoming yellowish toward the rear but otherwise is unmarked. The feet are moderately webbed and end in toes with the large, sticky padscharacteristic of treefrogs

Range. Most of the eastern one-third of the United States has resident populations of this amphibian. It also extends into Canada and as far west as Manitoba. Each of the state's counties has popula-tions of the northern spring peeper, available to signal the start of the spring season.



Habitat. The peeper seems to have no problem finding suitable habitat, which usually is a wooded area near a permanent body of water. Even temporarily flooded swamp areas, floodplains or ponds are acceptable habitat, although the water must be clean; the northern spring peeper avoids polluted water. It especially likes wooded areas with a full, jumbled understory. As winter approaches, the northern spring peeper prepares to hibernate beneath logs or loose bark in the woodlands where it has spent the spring and summer months. The males call only sporadically at this time.

Reproduction. The northern spring peeper is among the first frogs to leave the protection of its winter home and prepare for breeding. The high-pitched calls, which signal the start of the breeding season, can be heard in March as the air temperatures approach the mid-50s, and reach a peak when temperatures warm up another 10 degrees or so.

Courtship occurs March to June, usually initiated with the first warm rains. When the temperature is right, the peepers begin their migration to

nearby ponds or semi-permanent bodies of water where the female approaches to be grasped by the male. The female releases the eggs, which are fertilized by the male as they float away. The singular eggs become attached to plants, sticks and other underwater debris. Occasionally they may drift downward and settle on the bottom of the pond. As many as 1,000 eggs may be laid. They are tiny, black on top and white on the lower side.

The eggs expand and tadpoles break free in six to 12 days, depending on the temperature of the water. Metamorphosis follows in 90 to 100 days and the young froglets may climb onto nearby grasses even before the transformation process is completed. Inasmuch as breeding takes place early in the season, the juvenile frogs may have transformed completely as early as midsummer.

Call. A chorus of spring peepers is a familiar and most pleasing sound. It is welcomed as one of the first signs of spring, stirring life to a fresh start and brightening the listener's mood after the drab and dreary days of winter. Calling begins with the early warm rains and initially is heard day and night. The daytime serenading often comes from under cover, or perhaps with the peeper perched atop the mottled new tops of a skunk cabbage. Later, as the season wears on, vocalizing is limited to late afternoons and at night. Singing normally is done in groups, with choirs of peepers singing from their lofts in small trees or shrubs. The host trees and other bushes usually are in or near the water of a deep forest pond, small pool or even marshland.

The call of the spring peeper has been described as a high piping whistle, a single note ending with an upward slur. The single tones come at about one-second intervals. A large chorus of peepers heard from a distance is reminiscent of a series of leather-strapped sleigh bells jogging down a quiet country lane. The peeper's vocal sac is a single glistening throat bubble.

Food. Not a very large amphibian, the spring peeper feeds on small invertebrates. Flies, gnats, ants and small worms and grubs provide proper nourishment for this interesting amphibian.