

Spring Emergence

By Andy Avram, Interpretive Naturalist

During a rainy March evening when the thermometer reads 50° the average person might think it is the perfect time to grab a blanket and book and settle in for the night. But for a dedicated few it is a time to grab the rain gear, boots and a flashlight and head out to the woods. The melting snow combined with a relatively warm rain awakens secret denizens from underground. They crawl out of their woodland burrows and slowly plod through the forest to small temporary pools to breed. As they arrive at the pools they are heralded in by a rousing chorus of peeps and strange quacks. To most people this phenomenon goes unnoticed, but it happens every spring as it has for ages: the salamander migration.

Lake County is home to four species of salamanders (pictured on this page) that breed in these vernal pools. All of the salamanders lay their eggs in or near the water so the larvae – think of a tadpole for a salamander – can grow up and emerge later in the year as a land-dwelling juvenile. At 3 1/2 inches long, the smallest of Ohio's salamanders is the *four-toed salamander*. It lays its eggs in moss and vegetation overhanging the water where the larvae will drop into when they hatch. The three other salamanders are all closely related in a family called the mole salamanders. All grow about 6 to 8 inches long and lay their eggs in large masses in the water. The most common is the *spotted salamander*, named for two series of bright yellow spots running from its head to its tail. The *Jefferson salamander* is grayish brown with blue flecks on its sides. The *small-mouthed salamander*, which is uncommon in Lake County, has a gray or brown mottled pattern on a darker background.

While the salamanders are marching through, a few frogs are also breeding. The first and earliest is the *wood frog*. The frog is about 2 to 3 inches long and is gray, brown or even dark red, but it always sports a black mask. These frogs breed within the span of a few days, and their calls sound like a flock of ducks quacking. The other frog is very small, only growing about 1 1/2 inches long, and is named after its call. This tiny frog with the extremely loud peeping call is named the *Northern spring peeper* (sometimes simply called "peepers.") Like wood frogs, they are also gray, brown or dark red, but they all have a dark X across their back. Both of these frogs can be frozen nearly solid during the winter so they are able to wake up and head off to breeding ponds as soon as the temperature is right.

As winter begins to release its icy grip on the landscape and before the bluebells and trillium start, just remember that spring is already here. All it

takes is a pair of boots and a flashlight to see spring as it quietly crawls to secret forest pools.



Small-mouthed salamanders are the earliest salamanders to breed, sometimes crawling



The four-toed salamander is the smallest in Ohio and one of the rarest in Lake Metroparks.



Jefferson salamanders are named after Thomas Jefferson, former U.S. President and naturalist.



Spotted salamanders are the most common and brightly colored of the pond breeding salamanders.



Spring peepers congregate in huge numbers where their calls can be deafening.

Wood frogs need very clean water for their tadpoles to survive.

