

Sanctuary During the Year of the Frog

Text and photographs by Don Scallen

In spring the Niagara Escarpment awakens to the life-affirming calls of numberless frogs and toads. The voices start just after snow melt with the “quacking” of wood frogs and continue into the balmy days of summer with the sonorous “jug-o-rums” of bullfrogs. This is beautiful music, a soundtrack of a healthy environment.

It follows then, that when this music dies, the environment is in trouble, and alarmingly, this is happening throughout the world. Frogs are falling victim to habitat loss, pollution and disease. To raise awareness of this situation 2008 has been designated as the Year of the Frog by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. With habitat loss the main threat here in Ontario, the wetlands and woodlands of the Niagara Escarpment offer precious sanctuary for 10 species of frogs and toads.



Wood Frog

These frogs are aptly named, for they are utterly dependent on woodlands and forests. They appear in earliest spring and enter the icy water of temporary ponds, known as vernal pools, to breed. These ponds, void of hungry fish, are critical nurseries for wood frog tadpoles and the young of numerous other amphibian species. The Niagara Escarpment, beaded as it is with such spring pools, is a haven for wood frogs.



Western Chorus Frog

Chorus frogs are tiny springtime singers that accompany wood frogs and spring peepers to vernal pools. Running fingers along the stiff bristles of a comb approximates their call. These frogs are more comfortable in open areas than most, thriving in meadows and shrubby areas as well as open woodlands. Chorus frogs have a patchier distribution than many of our frogs and have suffered unexplained declines in some areas.



Spring Peeper

Though spring peepers have been silenced in much of the GTA, the Niagara Escarpment still resounds with glorious peeper choruses from early spring through May. In good habitat the cacophony of a “peeper pond” after dark can be mesmerizing. Spring peepers leave wetlands after breeding and spend the balance of the year foraging among ferns and mosses in woodlands.



Northern Leopard Frog

These familiar spotted frogs grunt and snore in Escarpment ponds in late April and May. Leopard frogs are habitat generalists and, given a permanent pond and a patch of natural land, can exist even within our urban areas. They spend much time in water, but also wander widely in meadows, growing fat on grasshoppers.



Pickerel Frog

Inhabitants of sylvan brooks fringed by jewelweed and cardinal flowers, these are frogs of pristine habitat. In the Golden Horseshoe the Niagara Escarpment is a pickerel frog stronghold; below the Escarpment the habitat is simply too sullied to support them. Pickerel frog males produce a weak snore in May to attract mates.



American Toad

A true amphibian survivor. Though most abundant in wooded areas American toads try gamely to hang on in even the most altered human environments. They regularly hop into backyards to gorge on urban sow bugs and earthworms. American toads will use almost any body of water for breeding. Their mellifluous trilling rises from ponds, roadside ditches and even swimming pools in mid spring.



Grey Tree Frog

These changelings wear a variety of garb depending, in part on the colour of the surface they are resting on. They can be grey as suggested by their name but also almost any imaginable shade of green. Hidden by their wondrous camouflage they are not often seen, though they are by no means uncommon. Wherever there are ponds and trees they can be found. Grey tree frogs use their fat adhesive finger tips to climb high into tree canopies where they sometimes serenade us with their short-burst trilling on moist days during summer and fall.



Green Frog

Green frogs are, along with American toads, the amphibians best able to deflect the slings and arrows of civilization. They are found in virtually all permanent wetlands in southern Ontario including polluted urban streams. These peripatetic frogs often strike out cross country to poke their noses into backyards and establish residence in tiny garden pools. From such sites and just about all other permanent bodies of water, green frogs pluck their banjo string voices from late spring into summer.



Bullfrog

The bruisers of our frog clan, bullfrogs live only in permanent bodies of water, where their tadpoles take from two to four years to develop. They are not uniformly distributed along the Escarpment and are often absent from seemingly suitable habitat. Bullfrog males sing their deep bass notes throughout the summer. The females lay platter-sized egg masses on the surface of the water.



Mink Frog

Perhaps “Canadian frog” would be a better moniker for these frogs, because their range lies overwhelmingly through Canada. Mink frogs look a little like both green frogs and bullfrogs. A field guide will help sort out the subtleties. They are northern frogs, and on the Niagara Escarpment, not found south of Caledon. Their voices, sounding like the distant tapping of hammers on wood, can be heard during summer.

Don Scallen is a teacher, writer and ardent frog fancier from Georgetown. All 10 species were photographed by Don Scallen on or near Escarpment lands.