

*Earth Day is coming up this week. In honor of this yearly celebration of our planet, a “guest columnist” has written this week’s essay. Laura Jacobson-Pentces has a Master’s degree in Environmental Science from the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay. She has extensive experience teaching environmental ethics and practical outdoor skills to both adults and children. As the Peepers peep and are joined and then eclipsed by other frogs, listening to this chorus of Nature is a perfect way to celebrate Earth Day 2020.*

As the snow melts and the temperatures start to get warmer, we here in Northern Michigan begin listening intently for the song of the Spring Peeper. This small frog, the smallest of the 13 species of frogs and toads in Michigan, has the loudest call of them all, and we use it as proof that spring cannot be far away. In honor of the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day, let us celebrate these creatures of the wetlands.

Children love frogs. I think that frogs are deceptively unperturbable. They seem placid and quiet; their faces don’t give them away. They don’t twitch, their ears don’t move. They just sit there. They are like little sitting or floating time bombs waiting with no indication that a sudden jump or leap is imminent. Until, all of a sudden, there is an explosion of quickness- a leap or jump that was impossible to predict when it would occur. It is this unpredictability, I think, that draws kids to frogs. As an environmental educator, I spent a lot of time with kids in wetlands searching for frogs and tadpoles. Swamps are interesting places, but many kids find them a little smelly, not to mention pretty mucky. A few kids usually hung back until the first frog was caught and then the lure of this elusive jumper overrode their reticence and soon they, too, would be standing in the muck, stalking frogs.

Frogs are the ambassadors of wetlands. Because they are an environmentally sensitive species, they are often used as bioindicators. They have narrow tolerance for conditions outside of their norms; thus the presence of them or conversely, their absence, gives scientists important data regarding habitat and ecosystem health. Knowing if their numbers are increasing or decreasing is important, but getting an accurate handle on their populations can be somewhat difficult. Frogs are mostly vespertine (active in the evening), and the mating season for some species is very short.

Luckily, frogs are a noisy bunch during their mating seasons, with each species having its unique call or song. It is these mating calls that are used to determine the populations or counts of frogs. Not all 13 species are active at the same time, either, as different frogs are more active at different temperatures, which really helps the frog counter! Early frogs, like Spring Peepers, are most active at about 45 degrees. They are so loud that they can sound like the ringing of sleighbells. Later in the spring, you might hear what sounds like someone snoring and then chucking at the end of the snore. This would be a Leopard Frog, who is active at temperatures above 55 degrees. The “galump, galump, galump,” of the bullfrog won’t be heard until temperatures are above 65 degrees.

Learning these songs and calls is not too difficult. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources website has an excellent link to Frog and Toads of Michigan as well as information on participating in frog surveys. Hearing these troubadours is one of the pleasures of living in Northern Michigan.

