

Wood frogs calling—a sure sign of spring

by Ted Bailey

If you live near a small pond or bog surrounded by forest on the Kenai Peninsula, you may have been hearing some mysterious sounds in the late evenings this past week. Some say these sounds remind them of birds, others compare them to a group of noisy ducks. The makers of these “clacking” spring sounds are difficult to see unless you are intent on discovering their source. Usually the calls stop before you can get close to the edge of the pond. However, if you are patient a small creature will pop to the water’s surface and you will be rewarded to see the Kenai Peninsula’s only amphibian—the wood frog.

Wood frogs began calling in a pond near our home last weekend, and breeding should reach a peak during the first two weeks of May. The snow and ice has barely melted from the pond and some snow remains around the pond’s margin. It is not unusual for wood frogs to begin breeding before ponds are entirely ice-free. At the peak of their breeding season, the calls of wood frogs can be heard during the middle of the day. Male frogs, which are smaller than females, make the “clacking” calls to attract females to the breeding ponds. Egg laying begins soon after the females arrive.

Eggs from each female are laid in a gelatinous mass about the diameter of a quarter. This egg mass soon expands by absorbing water to reach the diameter of a tennis ball or baseball. Wood frogs are communal breeders. Pairs of breeding wood frogs do not disperse their egg masses randomly around a pond’s margin. Instead, many frogs congregate together, and often nearly all the eggs in a pond will be deposited in only one or two small areas. They may place more than a hundred egg masses together within an area of only several square feet. Each egg mass is typically attached to a stem of grass or a small shrub. Within this egg mass are hundreds of separate eggs, each surrounded by its own protective membrane.

Hatching time is dependent on water temperature. In time the eggs develop into tiny tadpoles which break through the surrounding membrane and enter

the pond to feed on microscopic food. If they are lucky and the pond does not dry up, they will grow into tiny frogs before the pond freezes over.

The calls of wood frogs can also be heard throughout May on larger lakes, as these lakes become ice-free and their water temperatures rise. The larger lakes are often the last places to be used by breeding wood frogs and may be avoided if smaller nearby ponds are available. Although large lakes provide stable water levels, they are dangerous places for wood frogs to deposit eggs. Large lakes are more subject to wind action, and waves can tear the egg masses from the shoreline vegetation and destroy them. Many large lakes also support fish that prey on frog eggs or tadpoles. That is why small, shallow ponds whose margins are lined with aquatic plants are preferred breeding sites. Water temperatures in small ponds rise quickly in the spring, and the tadpoles are safer from predators.

This should be a good breeding year for wood frogs because of last winter’s high snowfall; abundant meltwater has filled many small ponds and muskegs. Small shallow ponds have been shrinking and many have dried up completely on the Kenai Peninsula over the past five years. Thus there have been fewer breeding ponds, and many of these ponds have gone dry before the tadpoles could hatch into frogs.

Among northern animals, adult wood frogs have developed a unique way to survive our harsh northern winters. They have the remarkable ability to thaw out and resume normal activity after being frozen solid deep under the forest litter all winter. When you hear these small northern creatures calling during the next few weeks, remember you are not alone in celebrating the arrival of spring on the Kenai Peninsula.

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