



Silent Spring Peeps Up at Last

A tiny frog sings its song, and all seems right with the world

At the edge of a clearing, just steps away from a vernal pond, I stand and listen. I lean forward as if somehow that will help my hearing.

There are no lions roaring in the brush, no wolves howling at the moon. But that's not what I'm waiting for.

I'm listening for Long Island's smallest amphibian, an inch-long frog called a spring peeper. We know the deep chirp of the male of the species as a sign of spring — female peepers know it as a mating call.

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Irene Virag

tails flashing in dusk's muted gray light.

It is a mid-April evening at the William Floyd Estate in Mastic Beach. Once it was the home of a prosperous cattle and lumber baron who journeyed to Philadelphia in 1776 to sign the Declaration of Independence. Later, his teenage daughter, Kitty, made news by turning down a shy patriot from Virginia and marrying a medical student instead. The disappointed suitor was named James Madison and he would become the fourth president of the United States.

Lopped trees still mark the boundaries of fields once given over to flax and grain, and white crosses signify the graves of slaves, and a 25-room mansion testifies to colonial comfort. But in this moment of gathering dusk, I'm more interested in natural history than American history.

I'm on the trail of *Pseudacris crucifer* — the species name comes from the X-like cross on the little brown frog's back. Ensclosed in the boggy banks of woodland pools, the males inflate their throats into big bubbles and create the piping sounds that are songs of love.

Whether I will find it here is yet to be heard. Deer abound in the 613-acre preserve that William Floyd's descendants used for hunting and fishing before donating it to the National Park Service in 1978. And according to my guide, Richard Stավdal, the ranger in charge, the resident wildlife population includes red foxes, wild turkeys, rabbits, raccoons, shrews, squirrels, moles, snapping turtles and diamondback terrapins. But in his more than 20 years on the property, Stավdal hadn't seen or heard a frog of any kind — not even a spring peeper.

So when researchers from the Wildlife Conservation Society showed up last spring to conduct an amphibian and reptile inventory, Stավdal could only hope. From late March through the end of September, for one week each month, naturalist David Brotherton and two assistants counted salamanders and snapping turtles and snakes as part of a joint project with the park service that surveyed cold-blooded creatures from Delaware to Maine. And they listened for the sound of frogs in the night.

But there is no guarantee that I will hear it in this place where a chill breeze rustles the bare branches of autumn olive and the thickets of *Rosa multiflora* leafing out in the fields. Where deer graze in the meadows, their white

On June 17, under the light of a half moon and with a gentle breeze blowing, they heard it.

Peep.

"We looked at each other and our eyes lit up," Brotherton recalls. "It must be a cricket, we thought. But it kept calling. We honed in on the sound, circling the area, stopping and listening, moving closer and closer. Then I reached for him and caught him in my hands."

They brought the tiny peeper back to the park office to photograph. The next day the frog was back at the pond.

It's not that *Pseudacris crucifer* is uncommon on Long Island. I've heard them in my own yard. Nobody is sure what caused the silent spring at William Floyd, although some naturalists suspect the pesticides that tainted Long Island's green spaces during the 1950s and '60s. One theory is that the wet skin of the little frogs, which acts as a respiratory organ, allows easy absorption of toxins found in pesticides such as DDT.

There was no guarantee whether Brotherton's courtship-minded peeper would leave as mysteri-

In a Southold pond last May, a spring peeper inflates his throat to sing his song of love.

Photo by Scott Hughes



ously as he arrived — whether in the way of his kind, he would crouch beneath leaf litter with some of his bodily fluids frozen solid and survive the winter. For that matter, there

was no surety that a female had been nearby to hear his call. Nobody knew whether *Pseudacris crucifer*'s appearance was a lovelorn moment or the start of a dynasty. All they could hope for was the sound of a peeper the following spring.

And so here I am with a park ranger, listening for a little night music by a small vernal pond born of snow melt and spring rains. "I love this stuff," says Stավdal, who has yet to hear a peep in the preserve this year.

We talk in whispers. Peepers fall silent when approached and then start again. Chartreuse tufts of sphagnum moss grow in the boggy borders along the pond and tawny rushes stir in the breeze. A buoy miles away in the Moriches Inlet sounds mournfully as if to mark the dying day.

The buoy fades. A towhee calls in the tupelo trees. And then — peep. A single clear note. A second later, it comes again.

"There he is," I say. The piping continues.

The park ranger smiles. "I think there are two."

It is one of those moments when I love my job. An inch-long frog sings a one-note love song in the twilight and for a moment, the world seems like a place of limitless possibilities.

Sometimes the call of the wild is just a peep.