

SPOT THAT FROG

The seven frog species living in the Merrickville-Wolford district are recognizable by their calls. This is great, because many of the frogs are so small or so well camouflaged that you may never see them in the flesh.

One exception to that rule is the highly recognizable Northern Leopard Frog, *Rana pipiens*, uniquely spotted and evident in gardens and fields all summer. Unfortunately it will also be evident this week in an annual slaughter on the roadways of eastern Ontario.

Why? What are these frogs doing on the roads? Where are they going and where have they been?

They are on their spring migration – one of three migrations Leopard Frogs undergo every year.

They have spent the winter in a state of hibernation, lying on the bottom of a river, stream or creek, barely breathing (through their skin) in deep, well-oxygenated, flowing water. On the first warm rainy nights of spring – 10 degrees or more – they climb out of their winter realm, travel uphill and cross-country to reach a familiar marsh or temporary wetland to breed. Their eggs must be laid in still waters. When the young have metamorphosed from tadpole into juvenile, terrestrial form, all will migrate again, hopping into fields, gardens and other open areas to hunt prey – mostly insects – through the summer. In the fall, they will make their way back to the rivers and streams for a good winter's rest. The fall migration goes in dribs and drabs on rainy nights from October to December, as long as the temperature permits movement. These cold-blooded creatures may travel many kilometers and will seize up in the cold, sometimes just stopping in their tracks, mid highway.

Squish. The spring migration tends to be more of a massive movement – *carpe* warm spring *diem*, er *noctem*!

Frogs will follow walls. For my first decade in Merrickville, I lived on the water – a glorious walk-out flat on Main St. East. Spring migration brought the hoppers up the terraced hill to the house, where they followed the structure around to the side and along to the window well, into which they invariably jumped or fell. For years, I counted frogs as I fished them out and dropped them into a deep bucket of river water, thence to walk them across the road and release them on t'other side, that they might continue their journey to the wetlands up Collar Hill. I must have saved hundreds from certain death over the years... I recall retrieving more than 50 on one wonderful day.

I have also spent countless hours over the years, slowly driving along and stopping to usher or carry frogs across the River Road – all the River Roads. My compatriot, Fred Schuler, local herpetologist of note, ascertained that you need to drive at 40 kph or less, if you want to safely straddle a frog. Otherwise you suck it into your undercarriage and drop it, lame, back onto the road. Splat.

The spring migration is massive, but it does go in waves over several nights: larger adults emerging first, then yearlings, then juveniles, looking like no more than a pebble on the highway... except they jump.

Throughout the summer, you might see all sizes and species of frogs on the road on rainy days and nights. They head out in warmth for a shower, then maybe get too comfy, or get stranded as the temperature drops. (Reptiles see the highway as a big warm rock to bask on – ask the turtles and the snakes! But that's another story.)

The important take-away here is that Leopard Frog migration is directional: in the spring, they're heading inland; in the fall, they are river-bound. Warm frogs are easy to shoo; cool ones easy to pick up and carry. Just be gentle with their very sensitive, absorptive skin. Wear reflective clothes to do your part. There are thousands of volunteer toad helpers in England. Perhaps we can establish a frog posse in Merrickville-Wolford!

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