

## *Pinkletinks ~ Pseudacris crucifer*

By Kim Smith

My husband Tom enjoys as much as do I the wildlife dramas that play out our in our postage-stamp-of a yard. With his artistic eye, he'll often point out new and noteworthy visitors. This week it was the sweet little spring peeper that lives in our outdoor shower. She blends perfectly with the leaf litter swirling around the stones at the base of the enclosure. I scooped her up, planning to pose her for a photo. She had other ideas and leaped onto the climbing mandevilla. My good fortune— if she had leapt into the adjacent night-blooming cactus it would have made for a much drabber portrait.

The species name *crucifer* comes from the Latin meaning *cross-bearer*. On this particular peeper her X is barely discernable; the intensity of color in northern spring peepers is variable. As opposed to the thirty plus species of toads and frogs found in Florida, only ten species are found in Massachusetts, which made identification fairly easy. However, I emailed a photo to Rick Roth at Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team to confirm.

*Pseudacris crucifer* is native to eastern North America and is known to inhabit regions as far north as Manitoba, south into eastern Texas, and east to the Atlantic Ocean.

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Amphibia

Order: Anura

Family: Hyildae

Genus: *Pseudacris*

Species: *crucifer*

Aptly called the spring peeper because it is one of the first to call in early spring; I imagine because of its large-scale toe pads the spring peeper is called “pinkletinks” on Martha’s Vineyard and “tinkletoes” in New Brunswick. The spring peeper is a relatively small frog,  $\frac{3}{4}$  to one inch, in varying shades of tan, olive green, gray, and brown, with lighter-colored belly, and the male has a darker fold of skin under his throat indicating the vocal sac. Like a balloon, the vocal sac expands and deflates to create the distinct peeping sound. Spring peepers are more often heard than seen. They are known for their clear ascending song, given both day and night which, when combined in chorus can be heard far and wide. Males call in duets or trios while perched in vegetation over water or on the water’s surface. These little tree frogs make a tremendous amount of noise, and as their music fill the air they become at risk to ribbon and water snakes, salamanders, other frogs, and owls. During mating they are particularly vulnerable.

*P. pseudacris* typically resides in mesic forests on trees, shrubs, and plants. Peepers awake from hibernation several months before they are heard; leaving hibernating sites in the woodlands— under logs, bark, logs, or leaves—and migrating towards freshwater ponds, vernal ponds, and flooded meadows. Upon emergence they rely on stored fat, but as the weather warms they begin to eat their usual prey of flies, ants, gnats, and mosquitoes.

The female lays between 800 to 1,000 eggs singly or in small clusters on plant stems, twigs, and leaf litter at the water's edge. The tadpoles stay in their birth ponds through metamorphosis, grazing on algae, detritus, and microorganisms at the bottom of the pond. Predacious aquatic insects such as water bugs, dragonfly larvae, and diving bugs prey upon the spring peeper tadpole. In response to predators, the tadpoles dart about and then remain inactive for long periods of time. The tadpoles grow into little froglets and begin to hit land in waves, hunting for food until the following hibernation. The life expectancy of spring peepers is typically three years.

To learn more about the great work of the Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team visit their website at <http://www.capeannvernalpond.com/>. A wealth of information is provided, including photos and videos, about the flora and fauna found in and around New England vernal ponds, school ecology programs, special events, and how to become a member.

*Kim Smith Designs* is an interior and garden design firm. Smith's first book *Oh Garden of Fresh Possibilities!* (David R. Godine, Publisher, 2009), which she wrote and illustrated, is available through your local bookseller and Barnes and Noble. She will be happy to respond to questions and comments at [kimsmithdesigns@hotmail.com](mailto:kimsmithdesigns@hotmail.com). For more information about *Oh Garden of Fresh Possibilities!*, butterfly gardening, current projects, exhibits, and events, please visit her website at [www.kimsmithdesigns.com](http://www.kimsmithdesigns.com).



