

Spring is a Glorious Time

By Rod Christie, Mianus River Gorge Executive Director



Spring is a glorious time, full of new smells, sounds, and colors that are in direct contrast to those departing months of winter. Perhaps my favorite season, it is the rapid emergence of new life that makes it so exciting. Snow and ice melt to reveal the landscape beneath and water is everywhere. Ephemeral wildflowers use the abundant sunlight to burst into bloom, birds return for their winter haunts and rush to stake out breeding territories, fish fight the current to work their way to their spawning sites, and, my favorite, the frogs begin to sing.

WOOD FROGS - There are more than half a dozen frog species that call the Gorge home and most of them are never seen by the average person, but most are heard. The wood frog is the first to emerge, most likely because it spends winter buried close to the surface under a layer of leaves. It has a remarkable ability to survive the freezing and thawing of winter. Its skin turns rock hard and crusty to protect it and a special protein in its blood makes the water in the blood freeze first. This freezing process sucks the remaining water out of the body cells which are at the same time being pumped full of glucose from the frog's liver. This combination dehydrates the cells, but the sugar keeps them from collapsing. Its heartbeat, brain activity and all bodily functions stop. When the weather thaws, so does the frog. Water flows back into its sugary cells, bringing it back to life. As the nearby pond thaws, it joins other wood frogs as they make their way to open water and begin to breed. Their raucous calls sound like a bunch of quacking ducks and they can emerge, mate and lay eggs in a matter of weeks if the weather cooperates.



Following the wood frogs are usually the spring peepers. These tiny woodland frogs also possess a type of anti-freeze all-be-it not as good as the wood frogs'. They emerge to breed by the thousands and their cacophony has disturbed many a light sleeper.



SPRING PEEPER



PICKEREL FROG



GRAY TREE FROG

Eventually most breed and their calls wane, only to be followed by the snoring calls of pickerel frogs; then the "single loud, throaty 'gunk' or 'boink'" of green frogs, and then the trill of the Gray tree frogs (which come down from trees to breed on rainy nights in June).



BULL FROGS - Then later in June and July the nights are home to the "loud low pitch, two-part drone or below" of bullfrogs. The bullfrog is an introduced species to the United States and is extremely aggressive. It will eat just about anything it can fit into its mouth, including other bullfrogs. I once saw a bullfrog try to eat a small muskrat unsuccessfully: quite a sight to behold. Beware of these guys--once they take up residence in your pond, you will slowly see all the smaller native frogs disappear as the bullfrog grows progressively larger.