

# Backyard nature: A frog-eat-frog world

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By Nicole Carter

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REGION — Social distancing is one of the most commonly used phrases these days, and what is it, like only about five months old? Maybe a bit older in other countries. But it seems like it's here to stay.

When the pandemic came to Maine I, like many other fortunate folks, had the option to work from home. Social distancing for me is as easy as waking up, living in the only house at the dead-end of a two-mile dirt road, in a deep valley. Fortunately again, I am something of an introvert. I was made for social distancing.

I'm no stranger to playing outdoors. I've always lived in places where exploring fields, woods and shores was the most interesting thing to do. I've tended ponies, sheep, alpacas, chickens, turkeys, ducks, cats, dogs and swine over the years. I'm pretty knowledgeable about small livestock and animal husbandry. I am a farm girl at heart.

But, having spent the last several months largely alone on my isolating farmstead, I have learned new things about the nature surrounding me.

Namely, it is cutthroat and fascinating.

Less than a stone's throw from our house is a pond, a man-made pond that captures drainage from the three foothill peaks that rise 1,200-1,600 feet around us. This pond is a marvel of amphibian and reptile life. The previous house-owners told us we might occasionally see a moose or bear through the window, although with two livestock guardian dogs on patrol we have little chance to see anything that big. But the frogs!

Starting in early April, as I was spending most days alone and as soon as the ice melted from our pond, these smallish frogs came out. Since I am not a biologist I do not know what species they were, but you could count dozens in a small radius, hundreds throughout if they would have held still. And goodness, how they bred! Within two days of their arrival the mass courtship was interrupted by a storm that dumped close to a foot of snow. But as soon as the temperatures warmed up and the slush gave way they were back at it.

These frogs were not big and they did not peep. But no sooner did scads of their eggs appear, affixed to almost every dead weed and stick under water, than they just disappeared.

Then the peeping began. Everyone knows that peepers are one of the first signs of real spring and as the peepers wailed their evening serenades, other frogs began to show up too. Bull frogs, green frogs, tree frogs and toads. One night I remarked to my husband that it sounded like the peepers had all come in the house.

Curious, I went out to investigate. Indeed, the peepers had taken over our yard. I had to watch where I stepped. They sat on blades of young grass, bellowing. Not one was in the pond. And I quickly saw why – a new population of amphibians had taken it over. Did the toads (and tree frogs) drive the peepers out? I don't know for sure, but I did learn that big frogs will happily eat little frogs. It's not pretty to watch but it's impossible to look away from. [I made a video of it.](#) It was engrossing and a little gross.



A peeper meets an unfortunate end to sate the appetite of a bigger counterpart. *Nicole Carter / Advertiser Democrat*

For all the danger amphibians encounter living in the pond, their procreation seems peaceful enough. The male hops a ride on the lady of his choice and they sort of float around together.

For a new spectator to the pond frog relations are something of a mystery, especially considering how many different species and sizes there are. Altercations between bull frogs? Downright laughable. They grasp each other with their slimy, little front legs and thrash around in the water. I have seen a couple of frog fights but it's impossible to say which was the victor.

Some frogs will contentedly loll alongside each other for the better part of a day while another will jump at every other frog it sees, driving them away from what it must believe to be the most valuable tract of cat-o-nine-tails. In this regard, frog personalities somewhat resemble ours.



A pair of tree frogs (I think), getting down to business. *Nicole Carter / Advertiser Democrat*

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And then there is our resident blue frog, a true surprise that I had no idea existed. Apparently this blue frog is really a green frog but lacks the yellow pigment it needs for its proper color to show. It is the equivalent of being albino, I've been told, which makes him a rare commodity. Our blue frog lives on the far side of the pond where I don't as often venture. He has his preferred place, under the canopy of an old birch tree. I check on him periodically because it's quite possible with his non-camouflaged shade he will eventually become a meal for one of the many garter snakes that hunt the pond. It really is cutthroat in the pond.

And the snakes that live around the pond, are a story of their own.





A blue frog, doing his best to attract a mate in the pond. *Nicole Carter / Advertiser Democrat*





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