

Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson
Pocahontas County Naturalist



October 24, 2018

“It’s not easy being green.” Kermit the Frog

Unless you’re a leopard frog living in rain-soaked Iowa, that is. I think most of us agree that 2018 will be remembered for its many rainy spells, frogs, and toads. Iowa is home to 16 members of the order Anura (without tail) in four different families: Ranidae (frogs), Bufoniadae (toads), Hylidae (tree frogs), and Pelobatidae (spadefoots). Today let’s encounter *Rana pipiens*, the Northern Leopard Frog, before they hibernate for the winter.

Northern Leopard Frogs are streamlined and handsome frogs, perhaps princes in disguise. They may be identified by their dark spots with light edges that look, as their name suggests, like spots on a leopard. Leopard frogs also sport a yellow dorsolateral fold on each side running the length of the body, golden irises, and webbed toes. They reach 3-5 inches in length and live 2-4 years in the wild. Did you know a group of leopard frogs is called an army?

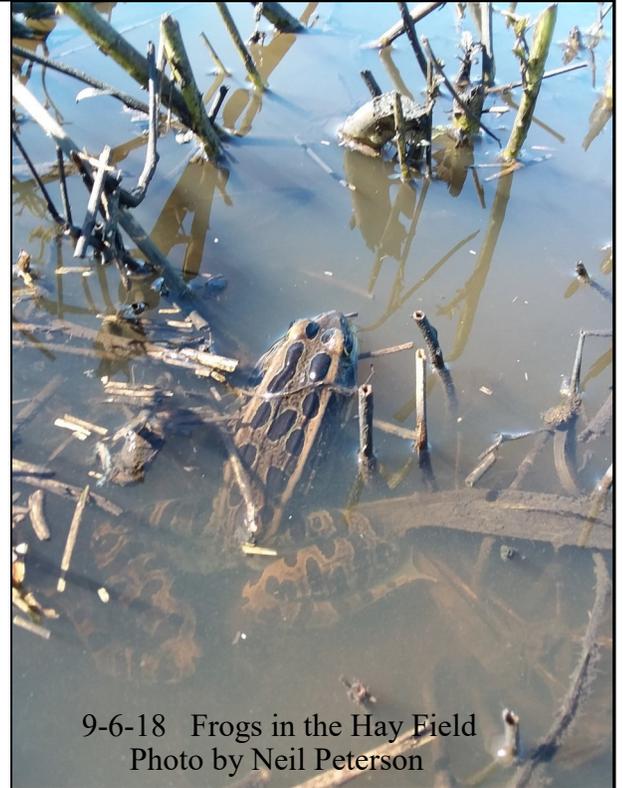
Northern leopard frogs live near ponds, swamps, and slow-moving streams of forested, open, and urban areas across northern North America. During the summer, they often leave the water to move to grassy areas and lawns, giving them their common name meadow or grass frogs. Like many of Iowa’s amphibians, they are fairly cold tolerant, a trait scientists believe arose from their past as they first bred in the cold waters of the melting glaciers.

Like all amphibians, leopard frogs lead two lives – life as a tadpole in the water and life as an adult on land. Each spring, females, drawn by the mating calls of the males, become wrapped in their fertile embraces before attaching their egg masses to submerged grass or twigs and spending the rest of the summer hanging out.

Meanwhile, the 5,000 plus eggs, left on their own in the still, warm, shallow water, hatch into tadpoles in nine days. The tadpoles grow rapidly and become quite large, about an inch wide, and develop legs in June. They leave the water in July to live along the shore, moving into grass to feed and jumping into water to escape predators such as snakes, raccoons, bigger frogs, and herons. Leopard frogs rely on speed to escape, a fact that also makes them very difficult to catch. Leopard tadpoles feed on algae while adults enjoy crickets, flies, worms, small frogs, even birds and garter snakes.

Leopard frogs play a vital role in medical research. They produce enzymes that are being researched as potential cancer drugs and have proven valuable in studies of neurons, muscle physiology, and biomechanics. If you dissected a frog in high school biology class, odds are high it was a northern leopard frog.

Throughout the summer, many leopard frogs will become food for other animals, but a few adults will burrow deep in animal burrows and other protected areas in the mud of ponds or stream bottoms to hibernate until a hint of another spring brings them to the surface. Shall we join them?



9-6-18 Frogs in the Hay Field
Photo by Neil Peterson