

village view

by Andrea Leonard

According to the calendar, it's Spring. It may not feel much like it, and it may not look much like it, especially since the Cape isn't famous for providing its residents with balmy breezes this time of year, but it won't be long before unmistakable signs appear assuring another summer's just around the corner.

Not only are buds swelling on the shrubs and trees as the days grow longer, but crocus blooms are poling up through the pine needles, even though the snow, if there's still some on the ground, and the birds are returning to their northern nesting places.

The male redwing blackbird is right on schedule, establishing his territory and preparing to welcome his mate when she arrives this week or next. All these are harbingers of Spring.

Following fast will be one of our surest indications Spring is really here. You'll not see it unless you go to a good deal of trouble to hunt it down, but you'll hear it. The sound will come at twilight of a soft evening: the peepers. Their chorus of millions of tiny voices is as certain and dependable as the lengthening of the days.

Wherever ponds, marshes and swamps have escaped the ravages of the bulldozers, you'll hear their high-pitched love-songs and thrill once more to their music.

You don't have to possess a wetland in your own back yard, nor will you have to walk much further than your doorway to enjoy them. On a quiet evening the peepers' calls carry half-a-mile or more from their watery habitat.

Some people have no idea what sort of creature they hear singing at dusk. Some people think they're frogs or polliwogs. It's almost unbelievable all that noise could come from tiny tree toads, so small one of them could hide in a lady's thimble.

The tree toad is known to zoologists as *Hyla crucifera* = Greek: woodland or forest, and crucifer = Latin: one who carries a cross; children and poets call it 'pinkletink'.

Its skin is smooth, its snout pointed and extended below the lower jaw, and although its toes are webbed, its fingers are not. On each one of its toes are small but distinct sticky discs that help it cling and climb.

While *Hyla crucifera* is nocturnal, its call is occasionally heard by day. In cold weather it hibernates under fallen leaves on the woodland floor. When calling, the tree toad inflates its entire body, and produces a musical series of notes, half-second peeps like high shrill whistles. The chorus sounds like sleighbells jingling in the distance.

It was of these little marsh sprites the poet wrote:

"The pipes of Pan in elfin chorus ringing
Bring sweet dreams of youth and love and spring."

For some of us, it's not enough to accept the serenade alone. We want to look at the creature and watch his performance. If you're determined to witness a treetoad's contribution to the marvelous din, rig yourself out in waterproof boots, carry a flashlight, and be prepared to spend time standing around motionless in the dark and damp of a nearby wetland.

As you approach, each tiny tree toad will fall silent. The sudden stillness will seem eerie in contrast, and you'll know you're surrounded by the noisy bits of life, but not a sound will they make if you take a single step.

If you wait quietly for several minutes, a few scattered peepers, those furthest from your position, will call; soon, all around you, thousands of voices will take up the melody again.

Now, shielding your flashlight's beam cautiously, look carefully at every twig and bit of rotting vegetation about knee-height.

You're hunting for a little toad about an inch long. He (and he will be a he, because only the males sing; the females which are slightly larger than their mates are mute) has a tan body that so perfectly blends with the background you'd never find him if he weren't all swelled up like a miniature balloon and screaming his head off.

He'll probably be clinging to a bit of dead grass or weed a couple of feet above the ground or the surface of the ground water.

Once you locate him you can positively identify him for on his back he wears a dark brown "X", part of his protective coloration. So successful is his disguise he's almost invisible among the tangle of rotting leaves and sticks.

After you've spotted the tiny fellow, you'll observe his belly is tinged with yellow; his throat, if he's fully mature, brown. The purpose of all his racket is to attract and woo the female.

Unlike most other toads and frogs which lay eggs in the water in long strings or masses of transparent jelly to protect them until they hatch, once mating is accomplished the little tree toad lady attaches each individual egg to a bit of decaying vegetation below the surface of the water.

The eggs hatch in approximately two weeks, sometimes sooner, depending on water temperatures. The tiny tadpoles, hardly larger than an exclamation point, feed on the primeval ooze from which all life originally spawns.

In two months the baby tree toads grow to a length of an inch-and-a-half, at which time, like frog tadpoles, their tails shrink and are absorbed. A new generation of peepers begins to grow up.

Although at this stage they follow adults of their kind into the moist woodlands, these little creatures need between three and four years to reach full maturity. Not 'til then do they return to the wetlands to join the spring chorus as adults.

When the breeding season ends in early May, the *Hyla crucifera* virtually disappears. Occasionally throughout the summer you may hear an individual call although you're unlikely to recognize it among all the other night sounds filling a warm summer evening.

In the moist woodlands the tiny toads live in trees, anywhere between the ground and the trees' crowns. They feed on insects, catching them deftly with a flick of their long tongues.

Whether you know them as *Hyla*, pinkletinks or peepers, their Song of Spring is as welcome in April as are the flowers that bloom in May. Listen for them!