

THE HIGH KNOB HERALD

ST. PATRICK'S DAY EDITION



The Clinch Coalition
Newsletter

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THIS ARTICLE IS PART OF OUR SERIES ABOUT HIGH KNOB, ONE OF THE MOST DIVERSE BIOSPHERES IN THE COUNTRY.

In Search of the Mountain Chorus Frog

By Wally Smith

The arrival of an Appalachian spring is signaled by a number of sights in the natural world. New growth begins to bud out and color the woods. Trillium, squirrel corn, and a host of other wildflowers appear across the forest floor. But well before even those earliest signs of spring make their way into the mountains, amphibians lead the way as we transition out of the winter season.

Most residents of central Appalachia are likely already familiar with some of the amphibians that make their presence known as we straddle the seasons between winter and spring. Wood Frogs, Spring Peepers, and Spotted Salamanders all crowd small wetlands in our region as spring begins to arrive each year.

Lost in this cacophony, however, is one of the High Knob region's most easily overlooked but fascinating amphibians: the Mountain Chorus Frog (*Pseudacris brachyphona*). A relative of the Spring Peeper, Mountain Chorus Frogs are around the size of a ping-pong ball and resemble peepers in terms of their physical appearance, ranging from brown to tan in color with darker markings across their back. And like Spring Peepers - both species are members of Hylidae, or the treefrog family - Mountain Chorus Frogs have characteristic, suction cup-like toe tips that help them climb short distances onto emergent vegetation growing just above the surface of shallow, forested pools.

One of the factors that makes the Mountain Chorus Frog so unique, however, is its relative rarity. Unlike Spring



Peepers, which can be heard in almost any wetland of any size in the region, Mountain Chorus Frogs are only found in select locations across our hills.

While one person may hear the species' call, which sounds like the rhythmic *reeeeeek-reeeeeek* of a squeaky wagon wheel, in their backyard, their neighbors may not, with the nearest population being located seemingly miles away. From the time of the Civil War through 2018, in fact, only around 15 verified populations of Mountain Chorus Frogs had been recorded from Southwest Virginia, leading the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources to assign it with the Commonwealth's second-highest ranking of conservation need.

In recent years, myself and Kevin Hamed, a fellow herpetologist at Virginia Tech, have been trying to learn more about this species - and we need your help. Specifically, we've been asking regional residents to listen for Mountain Chorus Frogs in and around where they live starting each February and running throughout the spring.

We're then asking anyone who hears a Mountain Chorus Frog to record its call - either your smartphone's voice recorder or even a short video will do - and send it to us as a citizen science record that we can then use to learn more about where this

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understudied species lives in our area. We've set up a website (<https://www.mtchorusfrog.fishwild.vt.edu/>) with more details on how to listen, where to look, and how to send observations to us.

Across just a few short years of searching, Southwest Virginians have completely changed our understanding of Mountain Chorus Frogs in our corner of Appalachia. For starters, we've found that the species is nowhere near as rare as we once thought, with those 15 or so observations recorded over more than 150 years ballooning to more than 100 confirmed observations of the species from Lee County to Blacksburg. Portions of the High Knob region appear to have especially abundant populations, including the floor of Powell Valley and the hills and hollows between the Guest and Clinch Rivers between Coeburn and St. Paul.



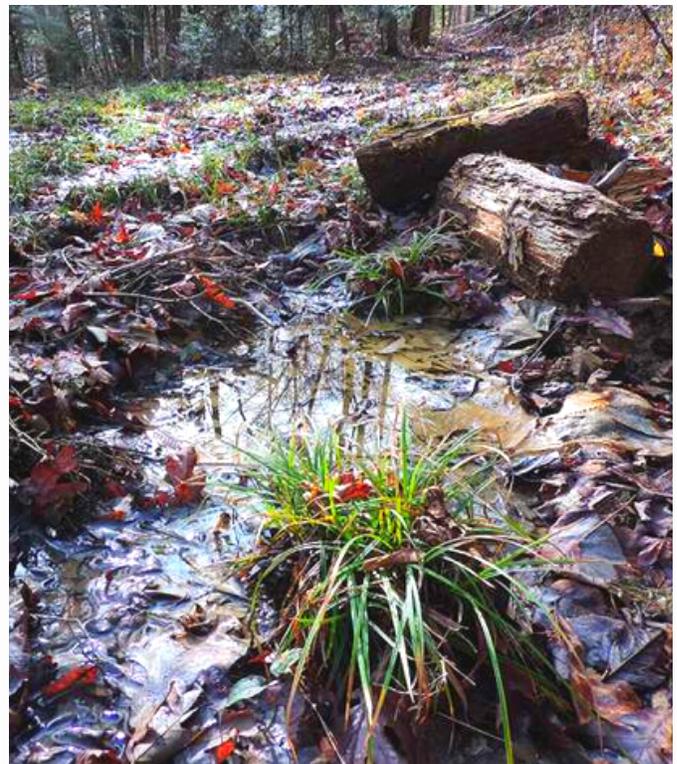
In addition, we're finding that Mountain Chorus Frogs live in some unassuming places, a factor that may have played into our past assumption that the species was incredibly rare. Rather than preferring pristine wetlands deep in untouched forests, Mountain Chorus Frogs love small and shallow wetlands that are often found in habitats that have been disturbed by humans. Old tire ruts along logging roads, drainage ditches, and flooded furrows in agricultural fields can all teem with adult frogs and their offspring in early spring. We've even found the species breeding in flooded depressions on gas well pads and in pools created by an overflowing septic system at Breaks Interstate Park.

However, there's not all good news in our findings about the status of Mountain Chorus Frogs in Southwest Virginia. Those same human-modified wetlands that have helped the species become so abundant are also frequently targeted by new disturbance, and they're often small enough to fall outside the regulatory coverage provided by Virginia's wetland protection laws.

During the few short years of our search, in fact, we've seen breeding populations lost to wetlands filled for ATV trail development and drained as part of routine highway maintenance. For our region's only frog species that's been assigned a high conservation need, living in unassuming and overlooked habitats can be a double-edged sword.

Going forward, we continue to need Southwest Virginia residents' help in inventorying where these fascinating amphibians live.

Check out the website linked above to learn more about when and how to listen for Mountain Chorus Frogs, and feel free to send us any observations you might make of the species within our area.





Activities

What's New on High Knob?

April 9th: Norton Easter Egg Hunt @11am.
Contact Rebecca Iozzi at rmiozzi@nortonva.org.

April 22nd: Earth Day Event with the City of Norton @10am. Join the Norton Green Thumb Garden Club to build a pollinator garden! Contact Rebecca Iozzi at rmiozzi@nortonva.org.

April 23rd: Great American Clean Up from 9am-1pm. A pizza lunch for volunteers will be served at 12 p.m. For more information, contact Rebecca Iozzi at rmiozzi@nortonva.org.

To get involved or learn more information, please reach out to us at info@clinchcoalition.org.



Photography by Bill Harris

Plant of the Month

Galax *Galax urceolata*

Galax, scientifically known as *Galax urceolata*, is a North Carolina native that exhibits shiny, long-stalked, roundish heart-shaped leaves, and is 2-5 inches wide.

This plant is a perennial with bright green leaves in summer that become bronzed to reddish in winter. Small white feathery flowers arranged in a narrow cluster on a naked stalk rise above the leaves in late spring or early summer. Its flower stalks range from 8 to 15 inches high.

Galax prefers cool, moist sites with partial shade. It grows in slow expanding clumps and its flowers attract bees. You can see it in abundance throughout the High Knob area.



Galax urceolata



The Clinch Coalition

The Great American Cleanup

April 23rd, 2022 @9am-1pm

Keep America Beautiful formed in 1953 when a group of corporate and civic leaders met in New York City to bring the public and private sectors together to develop and promote a national cleanliness ethic. The Great American Cleanup prompts individuals to take greater responsibility for their local environment by conducting grassroots community service projects that engage volunteers, local businesses, and civic leaders.

Join the City of Norton for this year's Great American Cleanup and do your part for to brighten our beautiful High Knob area!



Galax urceolata

If you would like to become a member or make a donation, please visit www.clinchcoalition.org.

