

Pickerel Frog (*Lithobates palustris*)

Family Ranidae

Subspecies: None currently recognized

Updated 2025



© Mike Day



© Carl Koch

Description/Identification: The Pickerel Frog is a medium-sized ranid frog, being slightly smaller than Northern Leopard Frogs (*Lithobates pipiens*). The snout-to-vent lengths ranges from about 1.18 to 2.75 inches, and the head and snout are slightly blunter than those of Northern Leopard Frogs, but still distinctly pointed. The skin is smooth and moist, or only very slightly warty or lumpy, and the fore-feet are not webbed. The hind toes on the hind feet are webbed, and a distinct pair of two lightly colored tan, light yellow, whitish or cream-colored dorsolateral skin ridges run down the back from behind the eyes to the hips and groin. The tympanic membranes of both sexes are about the same, being equal to or smaller than the eyes. Males and females are dimorphic in size, however, with females being larger than males, and during the breeding season, males develop swollen and enlarged inner-fore thumbs for clasping onto females during amplexus, as well as distinct internal vocal sacs. Inside the mouth, Pickerel Frogs and other ranid frogs have only very small, nonpedicellate (or incomplete) teeth on the maxilla and premaxillae weakly attached to the bone, which in many cases, are only calcified at their tips. Their teeth are perhaps most visible only through a high magnification electron microscope. Also inside the front of the mouths of most anurans, Pickerel Frogs included, is a projectile-like tongue made of extremely soft tissue, and which uses reverse adhesion and soft, viscoelastic properties coupled with non-Newtonian saliva.

Dorsal ground coloration usually ranges from tan, light brown, or grayish-brown with two or three rows of linear square-shaped to rectangular dorsal blotches running down the back in-between the dorsolateral ridges. An additional 2 or 3 rows of similarly colored spots or blotches run along the sides and margins. The fore, and hind limbs are heavily patterned in dark brown or black blotches, cross-barring, or banding, and one of the most distinguished identifying features of Pickerel Frogs are their golden-yellow inner thighs and groin regions, which the similar and commonly confused-with Northern Leopard Frog lacks. Pickerel Frogs are also never green in dorsal color, as Northern Leopard Frogs oftentimes are. In some populations in which both Northern Leopard Frogs and Pickerel Frogs overlap, Northern Leopard Frogs may strongly resemble Pickerel Frogs in their blotches, perhaps as a form of mimicry.

Pickerel Frog (*Lithobates palustris*)

Family Ranidae

Subspecies: None currently recognized

Updated 2025



Tadpole. © Ronn Altig.

The undersurface is usually a plain cream, white, or pale yellow. The tadpoles, upon hatching, range in size from 8 to 12 mm., and reach about 50 mm upon transformation into adult frogs. Pickerel Frog tadpoles appear similar to Northern Leopard Frog tadpoles, but have larger papillae ventral to the third tooth row, and the tail fins are more universally and densely pigmented with darker spots or blotches. The dorsal color of the tadpoles ranges from tan to light brown with darker brown or grayish spots. No subspecies of the Pickerel Frog are currently recognized.



© WDNR. Records also in Vilas and Florence Counties.

Link to Audio/Call: [Pickerel Frog \(*Lithobates palustris*\) \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

Range and Distribution: Pickerel Frogs have a large and broad distribution, ranging from southeastern Canada in Ontario and Quebec, through the Upper Midwestern United States, New England/Northeastern United States, and south in the U.S. to northern Georgia and Alabama in the east, and to eastern Texas, Oklahoma, and extreme southeastern Nebraska to the southwest. In Wisconsin, Pickerel Frogs are Wisconsin's rarest, or at least, least common species of ranid frog. They generally occur in isolated, or fragmented localities over the southern two-thirds of the state, and are much rarer, or absent in the northern third of Wisconsin. But they are perhaps most common in the unglaciated Driftless Area of western and southwestern Wisconsin.



Ventral/Belly View. © PA Herp Identification.

Pickerel Frog (*Lithobates palustris*)

Family Ranidae

Subspecies: None currently recognized

Updated 2025

Habitat: Pickerel Frogs are found in, and are associated with clean, higher-quality wetlands, and are susceptible to pollution and water quality changes. They require cold-water springs or spring-fed wetlands in order for breeding, and some of the associated habitats in which Pickerel Frogs may be found in or near can include mesic forests, glens or quartzite formations, and cool, densely canopied forests. Like Northern Leopard Frogs, they may stray away from water, and some other habitats they might turn up in can include spring-fed or kettle, pothole prairie ponds, backwater sloughs or swamps, bogs or fens, and wet meadows and small cool-water streams near and along marshes, shrubby or open meadows, ponds, or small lakes.

Feeding and Diet: Pickerel Frogs are primarily insectivorous, eating a wide variety of terrestrial or aquatic insects, insect larvae, worms, arachnids, snails or slugs, or other small arthropods and invertebrates, although other amphibian eggs or larvae may also be eaten (by both adults and tadpoles). The tadpoles feed primarily on algae and detritus material in their breeding ponds or wetlands.

Natural History and Calls: Pickerel Frogs begin to emerge from their overwintering locations and begin calling from about mid-April through May. After emerging from their overwintering sites, which may include having been burrowed into the bottom debris, within stream or pond banks, or from deep within or under rocks or logs, or simply from having been laying in torpor at the bottom, they will begin calling and courtship from the edges and margins of spring fed ponds, creeks, and lake edges.

Pickerel Frogs' calls are similar to those of Northern Leopard Frogs, but may be somewhat softer, higher, and less guttural. Like Northern Leopard Frogs, the Pickerel Frog's low, "snore-like" call can be drowned out by louder species of calling frogs. Shortly thereafter, the light brownish eggs are laid near the surface of the water, where they are attached to partially submerged vegetation in loose, globular masses. The tadpoles hatch within about 10 to 18 days, and fully metamorphose by 60 to 80 days. Unlike Northern Leopard Frogs, however, Pickerel Frogs usually remain closer to the water throughout the summer for the rest of the year, although they may also turn up in other unexpected places further away from the water, such as along or at the tops of bluffs or hillsides nearby to their breeding wetlands.

Pickerel Frogs are strong and bold jumpers, and their primary means of defense are to jump from the banks into the water and dive to the bottom when they are disturbed or threatened. Pickerel Frogs also possess distasteful and irritating skin secretions which they may emit that are toxic or distasteful to many animals. Their toxins or skin secretions are said to be strong enough to kill other amphibians in the same enclosed spaces.

Northern Leopard Frogs and Pickerel Frogs are commonly confused with one another, although generally, Pickerel Frogs possess more rectangular or square shaped, linear dorsal and side blotches, and characteristic golden-yellow inner thighs or groins. However, in some areas of Wisconsin and potentially elsewhere, Northern Leopard Frogs may strongly resemble Pickerel Frogs, and can be more difficult to distinguish. Whether this is simply an example of convergent evolution towards the same or very similar cryptic color patterns between Northern Leopard Frogs and Pickerel Frogs in the same areas, or a more

Pickerel Frog (*Lithobates palustris*)

Family Ranidae

Subspecies: None currently recognized

Updated 2025

active form of mimicry to dissuade predation due to the Pickerel Frogs skin secretions, is not fully determined, although the latter may be likely. Pickerel Frogs are generally active through October or November in Wisconsin.

Natural predators of Pickerel Frogs and their tadpoles can include a variety of large, carnivorous or predatory aquatic insects and/or insect larvae such as water bugs and water beetles, dragonfly larvae, and large spiders, as well as turtles, fish, other frogs and/or amphibian larvae, snakes, a wide array of birds, and many different small to medium sized carnivorous mammals including opossums, skunks, raccoons, weasels, mink, foxes, and other mammals. Other large wading birds such as herons may also eat Pickerel Frogs. Their toxic or distasteful skin secretions dissuade many predators, however.

Conservation Status: In Wisconsin, Pickerel Frogs are listed as a “Special Concern” species. They are regulated and protected along with all other of Wisconsin’s herptiles under N.R. 16. Pickerel Frogs are currently not protected or regulated federally. Pickerel Frogs are currently IUCN Red-List Least Concern (LC).