

Wood Frog (*Lithobates sylvaticus*)

Family Ranidae

Subspecies: None currently recognized

Updated 2025



© Sarah Viernum



© Zack Truelock

Description/Identification: Wood Frogs are a small to medium-sized ranid frog, ranging from about 1.18 to about 2.50 inches in snout-to-vent length. Males and females, for the most part, appear similar, and are only slightly dimorphic in size during the breeding season, with females being slightly larger than males. Males will also develop more enlarged fore-limbs and inner fore-toe digits used for clasping onto the females during amplexus. The skin is smooth to somewhat warty or lumpy, and the head and snout are somewhat narrowed and pointed. Toes on the fore-limbs are not webbed, and toes on the hind limbs are webbed. A pair of two dorsolateral folds, or ridges along the dorsum, usually a similar color to that of the ground color, are also present. The tympanums of both sexes are also generally smaller than the eyes, and webbing on the hind feet cover all but the last 2 or 3 digits of the fourth toes. Inside the mouth, Wood 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, Wood 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.

The dorsal ground color can be highly variable. Wood Frogs can vary in dorsal color from light tan, pinkish or pinkish-brown, dark red or reddish-brown, blackish, to grayish-brown, and there are usually scattered, irregular dark spots or blotches along the sides and dorsolateral folds. The ventral or underside is a uniform light grayish to white. The most conspicuous identifying feature of Wood Frogs are their wide, thick, dark brown or black “mask” running just posterior to each eye on each side of the head, as well as their white stripes running from the upper lips or mouth, onto the shoulders. Juvenile and younger Wood Frogs may also have two narrow, bright reddish stripes running parallel between the dorsolateral folds. Some adult Wood Frogs may also have 1 to 3 white mid-dorsal stripes in running from in between the eyes on the snout, through-between the dorsolateral folds as well.

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Tadpole. © Michael Benard.

This characteristic dark “mask” may also be obscured or inconspicuous on some lighter or darker colored specimens as well. The fore and hind limbs can also have faint to distinguished dark spots, blotches, or cross banding or barring, particularly on the hind limbs. The tadpoles range from about 10 mm. at hatching, and about 30 to 40 mm. at development. Tadpoles have short, finned tails with highly set fins. Their mouths are margined in black, and have 4 lower, and 3 to 4 upper labial tooth rows. They are dark brownish in dorsal color flecked with black and gold, and bluish-white, semi-translucent undersides. The tail musculature is lighter than the rest of the body, and are clear with darker mottling. No subspecies are currently recognized.



© WDNR.

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

Range and Distribution: Wood Frogs have a very broad northern range, expanding from much of Alaska, southeast throughout much of Canada to Labrador, and into the United States, covering the New England states, and east-central United States. More disjunct, or relict populations also occur in several other U.S. states including Kansas, Arkansas, Wyoming, Colorado, and Alabama. In Wisconsin, Wood Frogs can be found in suitable habitat throughout most of the state, except the southern-most portions, where they are rare or absent.

Habitat: Wood Frogs are a forest and woodland associated species, and can be found in a variety of northern and southern forested habitats as long as they are suitable. These frogs may be found in and amongst boreal forests, mixed northern and southern hardwood and coniferous forests, mixed mesophytic (moderately wet or moist) forests and woodlands, and floodplain or riverbottom forests. Temporary, ephemeral ponds and wetlands, swamps, springs and spring-fed wetlands, and kettle or pothole ponds amongst or near these habitats are the primary breeding habitats utilized by Wood Frogs.

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Ventral/Belly View. © Michael Benard.

Feeding and Diet: Wood Frogs are primarily insectivorous, and will eat a variety of small terrestrial and aquatic invertebrates. They may eat small aquatic to terrestrial insects, insect larvae, worms, arachnids, gastropods, or other small arthropods or other invertebrates. The tadpoles feed on aquatic algae, or other aquatic plant material and detritus, or sometimes other amphibian eggs or larvae.

Natural History and Calls: Wood Frogs are an early-spring emerging frog, and are the first species of ranid frogs to emerge and begin calling once they emerge from their overwintering places above ground under or within rotting logs, rocks, or other debris. Soon after emerging, they reach their breeding ponds, and begin calling along with Spring Peepers, Boreal Chorus Frogs, and/or other early-spring calling and breeding amphibians such as Eastern Tiger Salamanders, Blue-spotted Salamanders, and/or Spotted Salamanders. Their calls sound like the quacking of a duck, or very distinctive “chattering”, “clucking”, or “chuckling”.

Wood Frogs have among the shortest calling periods among Wisconsin’s amphibians, ranging from about mid to late March to mid April, and which may last for periods of only a few weeks. It is entirely possible to miss the Wood Frog calling season for any given year. Shortly thereafter calling, large globular egg masses are deposited and attached to submerged aquatic plants, or other vegetation usually near the surface of the water. Anywhere from 500 to 800 or more eggs are laid per egg mass. Wood Frogs tend to congregate in certain sections of a pond or wetland, which is determined each year by the temperatures, water depths, or other changes to the wetland.

Depending on the water temperatures and other local environmental conditions, the eggs then hatch in about 10 to 15 days later, and the tadpoles fully transform and metamorphosize into adult frogs one and a half to two months later before the ponds or wetlands dry up. After breeding, the adults disperse back into the surrounding areas, where they may be found amongst the humid, moist forest floor leaf litter and debris foraging for food. In dryer areas, they become much more limited in activity and are usually not seen unless after rains.

Boreal Chorus Frogs (*Pseudacris maculata*) are smaller than adult Wood Frogs, have slightly enlarged toe-pads, and lack dorsolateral folds and usually three broken or complete dorsal stripes. Wood Frogs are also not very tolerant of urbanization, agriculture, or forest clear cutting, and tend to become rarer and much more localized in areas where these factors begin or are taking place.

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Natural predators of Wood 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, shrews, weasels, mink, foxes, and other mammals. Other large wading birds such as herons will also readily eat Wood Frogs.

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