Jeepers Creepers, Can You Hear Those Peepers?

If you happen to find yourself near a small body of water such as an ephemeral pool or wetland during this time of year, chances are you will hear the call of a very small, but very loud critter – the spring peeper! Known as *Hyla crucifer* by scientists, these tiny frogs are a species of tree frogs and have small sticky pads on their feet allowing them to climb vegetation. Despite this, peepers seem content to stay close to the ground and are rarely found more than a few feet up in shrubs and bushes.

Spring Peepers are about one inch in length and could sit comfortably on your thumbnail. They usually have a unique X-shaped marking on their backs. They are generally tan to light brown or gray, and an individual frog can actually change its color sort of like a chameleon. This description may not be very helpful though, as despite their loud call they are often quite difficult to locate due to their tiny size and camouflaging coloration. The call of the spring peeper is a short, high pitched “peep,” hence the name. A single peeper generally calls about once a second – adding up to thousands of calls every night! A group together sounds a bit like sleigh bells. Choruses of spring peepers have been measured topping decibel levels of 120 dB, slightly higher than those of an average rock concert! This peeping chorus can be heard up to a mile away on a clear night. Compare this to the loudest land animal on earth: the Howler Monkey. Howler Monkeys can be heard up to three miles away; however, when you consider the size ratio, a 1” spring peeper’s call puts the Howler Monkey to shame!

While you’re listening to this froggy din, don’t be surprised if you hear other frog species as well. Along with the peepers you may hear the raspy call of Chorus Frogs (which sound like a fingernail drawn down the teeth of a comb), the trill of American Toads, the “plucked loose banjo spring” call of a Green Frog, or the duck-like quacking of a Wood Frog.

Spring Peepers can tolerate very cold temperatures, and are one of the few frogs to call outside of their mating season, so they can be heard throughout the year, though most commonly in late spring. Next time you’re out and about, listen for these guys (and guys they are, since only the males call) and look around carefully. You just might be lucky enough to observe a spring peeper calling his lungs out, cheerfully looking to attract a mate.

Check at some frog and toad calls at: http://www.naturenorth.com/spring/sound/shfrsnd.html
Since I started working at Taft in August of 2010, I have spent countless hours wandering the forests around the property. In these wanderings I have paid extra close attention to the types of trees I’ve come across. Specifically, the locations of such trees as chinquapin oaks, red cedars, isolated white pines, and exceptionally large individuals of varying species. Amidst all the naturalizing and tree identification, one fairly abundant specimen always puzzled me as to its identity. The problem with identifying these trees was that they had no bark, no leaves, and no buds; none of the features that would normally be used to identify trees. They were skeletons of the forest.

After plenty of observation, thinking, researching, and one magical epiphany, I came to realize that these unknown skeletons were Elm snags. A snag is a dead tree that is still standing upright. These dead elms had succumbed to Dutch Elm Disease (DED). DED is caused by a species of Ophiostoma fungus that is native to Eurasia. It is believed that the fungus was transported to North America via infected timber from Europe in the late 1920’s. The disease had already decimated the elm tree population in Europe in the first decades of the 20th century before anyone realized what it was. Then a plant pathologist in the Netherlands isolated and identified the disease in 1921, hence the name Dutch elm disease.

The American elm, Ulmus Americana, and the Slippery elm, Ulmus rubra, (both native and found around Taft campus) have no natural immunity to the foreign fungus. DED is mainly spread among elm trees by a vector, the elm bark beetle. A vector is the carrier (elm bark beetle) of a pathogen (Ophiostoma fungus) to its host (elm tree). (Another example is the deer tick, which carries Lyme disease and spreads it to humans when it embeds itself in the skin.) Like a tick on a mammal, the elm bark beetle burrows its way through the outer bark of a healthy tree into the inner bark where the adult beetles carve out galleries to lay their eggs in. If the adult beetles are carrying DED, some of the spores may be left on the insides of these galleries. When the larvae hatch in the spring they continue feeding within the galleries and inevitably pick up the spores, which as adults they carry off to other healthy elms to repeat the process, thus inoculating more and more elm trees. Continued on next page...
Dutch elm disease can also be spread through root grafting. Root grafts occur when two different elm trees’ roots come in contact with one another, thus becoming fused. The DED fungus can then easily pass from one tree to the other through the root graft. Once the fungus has entered the tree’s roots, it spreads up into the crown of the tree by the transport of water and nutrients. The spread of DED by root grafts kills an elm much faster than the elm bark beetles, but is only effective in areas where elms are growing in close proximity to one another.

The spread of Dutch elm disease through root grafts was most evident and devastating in urban areas, where elms were the most planted landscape tree. Elms lined the streets of many towns and cities across the country, favored over other trees because of their height, distinct shape, and the abundant shade they provided. The elm was so synonymous with urban landscaping that its name has been lent to almost 100,000 “Elm Streets” across the country. This stately tree met its demise soon after the introduction of DED in America.

It’s estimated that DED has killed about one half of the elm trees in America since its inadvertent introduction 80+ years ago. I would say that estimate holds true at Taft as well, with about an equal number of living trees to dead skeletons found in the forest. The elm snags and deadfalls are still beneficial to the forest ecosystem, for instance, woodpeckers search for insects in the rotting wood and even drill out cavities for nests. The fallen elms create habitat on the forest floor for smaller mammals, reptiles, and insects, and the decomposing wood returns nutrients to the soil.

It’s important to recognize the threat that invasive and exotic organisms pose on native populations of plants and animals. If you enjoy spending time in the outdoors, educate yourself on exotic pests in your area and learn what you can do to limit your impact. And remember next time you’re out and about, keep an eye out for those skeletons of the forest.

Morel mushrooms are one type of fungus associated with dead elm trees. These morels were found around the base of an elm snag. An experienced mushroom hunter knows just when and where to find these little treats.

A fallen elm creates great habitat for animals as evidenced by the raccoon claw marks on the tree and burrows under the root ball. Deer beds can sometimes be found among the dense crown branches of the deadfall where they’re protected from the weather.
Organizing Kids: Suggestions to make your Taft trip run smoothly

With approximately 75 schools coming to Taft annually, ranging in size from 25 students to 150, we see it all regarding different ways of grouping and organizing kids. The following are some of the ideas we’ve seen. If you’ve been thinking, “We could do a better job of making sure that everybody is where they need to be when they need to be there,” some of these suggestions might appeal to you.

**Arrival Procedures:** Having a plan for unloading the bus helps to prevent delays in getting into the dorms, as well as having to deal with idle kids waiting for luggage. Some groups have adults do all the luggage unloading; others have a group of kids assigned to that responsibility. The rest of the students wait on the bus until all of the luggage is unloaded. Also, if you have more activity supplies than you could handle in one trip, ask your Taft coordinator to have a garden cart ready at the bus lane to help you transport those things around campus.

**Nametags:** We love nametags; it’s so nice to be able to call the students by name. Nametags can also be used to print the information that each student needs to know – learning group, table number, hopper assignment, dorm assignment, and even his/her schedule. Arrival and orientation go much more smoothly when the students know this information prior to arriving. Nametags that are large enough to have the student’s name read at a short distance and transferable to different clothing, jackets, etc. (in other words, not stuck on clothing) are the most effective.

**Journals:** If the students have journals to complete, a page with the information noted above is another way to make sure they have the pertinent information about their groups and schedules. Journals are also a great way to make connections to classroom curriculum, give kids something to do during “down time,” and create a memory of outdoor education for each student to keep.

**Hopper Delivery:** Some schools have one teacher who is responsible for making sure the hoppers get to the dining hall on time. Sometimes this is one teacher for the whole trip, or the responsibility can be rotated for the day or meal.

**Assigned Tables:** Most groups have the students assigned to tables for meals. This is the best way to ensure meals start in an orderly way. If you’d like to have the table numbers moved from one meal to the next so that everyone gets a chance to enjoy the view, let your Taft coordinator know.

**T-Shirts/Bandannas:** Some schools use different colors of t-shirts or bandannas to make it quick and easy to see what group a student belongs in.

**Group Leaders:** Schools that are able to bring plenty of adults often will assign one adult to each group for the entire trip. This is advantageous in that the assigned adult gets the opportunity to know that group of kids well, however, this may not work for groups who aren’t able to bring extra adults.

**Main Meeting Site vs. Activity Meeting Sites:** Some groups have a main meeting area from where the groups start and end each activity. Others have a designated meeting spot (usually a classroom) for the different activities; the groups meet the activity leader there. Both ways can be effective depending on the needs of the group. Meeting at designated areas for the activities works well for older students or for younger students that have a designated group leader to travel with them between activities.

If you have any questions about any of the organizing details you are dealing with, please don’t hesitate to ask your Taft coordinator. We would like to help you make your trip go as smoothly as possible.

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“Organizing Kids...” Melanie Costello

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**ZERO ORT WALL OF FAME**

The Taft Staff would like to recognize the following schools for having zero ort during at least one meal while at Taft. CONGRATULATIONS and WELL DONE!!

St. Raphael
Illinois School for the Deaf
Our Lady of Mt. Carmel
Washington School
River Ridge