

Bay watch | EVERY THURSDAY THROUGHOUT THE SUMMER WE UNCOVER THE HIDDEN WONDERS OF HAMILTON HARBOUR

An abundance of reptiles and amphibians is found in Cootes Paradise and the Hamilton Harbour area. Whether people are looking for snakes, turtles, frogs and toads or salamanders, chances are they won't be disappointed

A haven for living creatures

BY **DANA BORCEA**

They're slimy and scaly, but they're ours.

Our harbour is alive with herpetofauna — the term nature types use to describe reptiles and amphibians.

The differences between the two are many, but here's an easy distinction to remember: reptiles have dry, rough skin while amphibians are slimy and smooth.

Like so much of the bay's wildlife, most can be found

slithering, crawling, hopping or just hanging out around the northwest corner of the harbour in Cootes Paradise, Carroll's Bay and the Hendrie Valley Ponds as well as pockets around the northern shoreline.

Reptiles like to "bask" on lazy summer days, a pastime used by cold-blooded reptiles to warm up. You can find them lounging on rocks and logs or crossing the road in search of a warm spot to lay their eggs.

Amphibians, though, are best spotted at night. For

frogs, toads and salamanders, night time is the right time for breeding and avoiding predators.

Drivers can also spot them crossing roads on rainy summer nights.

The Hamilton Naturalists' Club recommends "herping" at night with a flashlight and a pair of good rubber boots to combat all that mud.

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Hamilton boasts a variety of amphibians and reptiles. Here's a snapshot of some of the harbour's most prominent.



EASTERN GARTER SNAKE

This is Hamilton's most common subspecies of the popular garter snake.

The snake comes out of hibernation to mate in early spring. Soon stirred into a mating frenzy, garters are known to form a breeding ball, or amorous interlocking tangle.

Unlike most snakes, female garter snakes don't lay eggs but give birth to live young — sometimes more than 50 at a time.

Usually the first snake spotted in Hamilton each spring, the garter can often be found basking in a sunny spot as early as March.

But frozen snakes found on top of snow throughout Hamilton indicate that winter basking can be deadly.

This snake has an experimental palate with a taste for earthworms, insects, frogs, salamanders, nestling birds, mice and other small snakes.

The eastern garter, immune to the warty venom of American toads, will eat them as well.

It can grow longer than a metre in length, and although its colour patterns vary, it's almost always marked by three yellow stripes.

A good swimmer, the eastern garter can be found throughout the harbour area and is fond of the sunny edges of paths.

Brown snakes and to a lesser extent, northern water snakes, are also found around the harbour area.

EASTERN AMERICAN TOAD

This "hop toad" is thriving in the harbour and well beyond. The eastern American toad is the most common amphibian in Hamilton. Its abundance has a lot to do with its adaptability.

All this resilient toad really needs is a pool of stagnant water for breeding. This happens after it emerges from hibernation between May and June and fills the air with its long trilling mating call.

Toads are among the last amphibians to go into hibernation and might be spotted as late as November.

Described in most literature as "very warty," the toad produces a white sticky substance from these numerous warts, intended to turn off would-be predators.

Most are brown, but colours can range from grey-brown to red-brown.

Breeding males have a black throat and are smaller than females.

A modest-size, seven-centimetre toad will eat about 3,200 insects in a season, including ants, beetles, slugs, spiders and mites.

This toad can survive in fairly dry conditions and can be spotted near Cootes Paradise and Hendrie Valley Ponds.



PHOTOS BY BOB BOTTS

NORTHERN LEOPARD FROG

Widespread throughout Hamilton, the well-known leopard frog can thrive in dry conditions better than most frogs. It has been known to travel a good distance from the water, making an encounter with people quite likely.

The medium-sized green or brown frog derives its name from its distinctive dark spots ringed with paler halos that make it easily recognizable.

Adults range from five to 10 centimetres and, as with most amphibians, females are larger than males.

After breeding in the spring, the adult northern leopard will often leave the water for higher, drier land.

Also known as a meadow or grass frog, the northern leopard frog likes moist meadows and the edges of ponds, and it can be spotted throughout the harbour, particularly around Cootes Paradise and the Hendrie Valley Ponds.

Northern spring peepers also live in Cootes Paradise, while green frogs can be found throughout the bay area.

SNAPPING TURTLE and PAINTED TURTLE

Along with the painted turtle, the snapping turtle is the area's most common turtle. The snapper is by far the largest, with a shell length of up to 45 cm and a weight exceeding 15 kilograms.

Muscular legs and a large head give it an even more imposing look.

Unlike other turtles, a snapper can't retreat completely into its shell and, as a result, it can become defensive if threatened on land.

Carl Rothfels, Natural Steward at the Royal Botanical Gardens, describes the species as "misunderstood."

"They can't protect themselves like other turtles. Their snapping and hissing scares people, but they're actually calm, mild-mannered animals."

In the water, a snapper will indeed slip quietly away from confrontation.

The west end of Cootes Paradise has among the highest density of snapping turtles in the world. They can also be found throughout the harbour area including the north shore and Windermere Basin.

The equally common painted turtle can also be found along the harbour's shorelines basking on logs and rocks.

With no natural predators, adult turtles are very resilient. But development and the increased traffic that comes with it are threatening the harbour's turtle population — the snapping turtle in particular. According to a 2001 study by the Royal Botanical Gardens, 74 snapping turtles and 11 painted turtles were run over and killed by vehicles in a two-year period on a stretch of Cootes Drive around the Spencer Creek Bridge. The sunny, gravel-lined sides of the busy road attract female turtles in search of suitable nesting sites.

Though not a native turtle species, the red-eared slider can also be found in the area. The pet is frequently released into the harbour by owners who do not realize that the species does not breed successfully here. The sliders may also threaten native species by monopolizing basking areas and competing for food.



PHOTOS BY KEN NEWCOMBE



THE NORTHERN REDBACK

Head into the hardwood forests around Cootes Paradise and the Hendrie Valley Ponds if you want to see one of the bay area's most common salamanders.

While more common along the Niagara Escarpment, it is possible to find one around the harbour area if you look under enough rocks or inside rotting logs.

Try to catch one sleeping during the day. In these forests, they're strictly nocturnal.

Between six and 12 centimetres in length, this salamander gets its name from a red stripe that runs from its head to the tip of its tail.

These salamanders avoid freezing by burrowing underground from October through April. Mating usually occurs in late fall, and the females retain sperm until fertilizing and laying eggs the next summer.

The Reptiles and Amphibians of the Hamilton area, summarized from the Hamilton Herpetofaunal Atlas, the Hamilton Naturalists Club and the Royal Botanical Gardens