What are amphibians and reptiles?

Like birds and mammals, amphibians and reptiles are vertebrates, meaning that they have a backbone. Unlike birds and mammals, their body temperatures can vary greatly, based on their surroundings.

Amphibians

Amphibians include frogs, toads, newts, and salamanders. Many amphibians have a complex life cycle that involves living both on land and in water. While most adult amphibians have lungs, they also breathe through their skin, which must stay moist to allow oxygen to pass through.

Reptiles

Reptiles include turtles, snakes, and lizards. Most reptiles that you'll encounter in your backyard are terrestrial, spending most of their life on land. Reptiles breathe only through their lungs and have dry scaly skin.

Did you know?

- Some snakes lay eggs, but others give birth to their young!
- Turtles never leave their shells!
- Some salamanders live more than 10 years!
- Like some mammals, amphibians and reptiles also hibernate during the winter!

Learning more

Visit the Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation website for more information on how you can help. See our Habitat Management Guidelines series for more detailed information about improving your backyard habitat.

www.parcplace.org

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Northeast PARC product – Backyard brochure, version 2.0
Photos courtesy of Scott Smith, Matt Kull, and Tim Green

Your Backyard Guide: Helping Amphibians and Reptiles

Creating an Amphibian & Reptile Friendly Backyard

Just as you can attract birds by putting out bird feeders and butterflies by planting a butterfly garden, you can also make your property a habitat for amphibians and reptiles. This brochure will help you understand what amphibians and reptiles are, why they need our help, and what you can do to create an amphibian- and reptile- friendly backyard.

What risks do amphibians and reptiles face? How can you help?

Amphibians and reptiles are important parts of the ecosystem. They eat a large number of mosquitoes, other insects, and rodent pests, and can be a valuable food source for other wildlife. Factors such as urban development and pollution are causing their habitats to be lost or degraded. But you can help. Your backyard can provide important habitat for wildlife. By following a few simple suggestions, you can improve the quality of your yard for amphibians and reptiles. And in the process you'll help yourself too, as amphibians and reptiles actually make great neighbors.

How You Can Help

- **Enjoy wildlife where you find it** – Keeping wildlife as pets prevents them from reproducing, which is important for survival of wildlife populations in your area. It also may be against local wildlife laws and regulations.
- **Don't move wildlife** – Wildlife encountered in your backyard are at home; this is where they live. Moving an animal to somewhere "better" (like a pond, park, or forest) can leave it vulnerable to predators and make searching for food more difficult. Amphibians and reptiles that are moved also may be killed crossing roads as they try to return to familiar surroundings.
- **Don't turn it loose** – Don't release plants and animals from your home to the outdoors. This includes aquarium plants and animals. These living things can introduce diseases or become problems as they compete with and prey on native wildlife and plants.
- **Keep cats inside** – Outdoor cats kill millions of songbirds per year and are thought to kill a great many amphibians and reptiles too. Keeping your cat indoors not only helps wildlife life, but keeps your pet safe from cars and other dangers.
- **Minimize pesticide use** – Amphibians are particularly vulnerable to pesticides. Their skin allows not only water and oxygen to be absorbed directly into their body, but chemicals too.
- **Minimize fertilizer use** – Excess fertilizer can run off into nearby water bodies (ponds, streams, rivers) where it may cause harm and even death to aquatic animals.
- **Plant native species** – Plants adapted to live in your local area need less maintenance than those originally from other areas. Native plants are often hardier and require less water, fertilizer, and pesticide use.
- **Enhance habitat** – Including different habitat types in your yard will give wildlife more spaces to use. Landscape using a variety of native shrubs and trees. Let leaves stay where they fall on all or part of your property and provide logs, rocks, and brush piles of branches and twigs as shelter.
- **Maintain backyard ponds in natural state** – Ponds can be important breeding habitat for frogs and salamanders, but only if large predatory fish that feed on eggs and young are not present. Keep or plant native vegetation around a pond's border as it is important shelter for tadpoles and small frogs to avoid predators.