

A Croak in the Night

I once spent a particularly rainy vacation at a beach house in South Carolina. There wasn't much sun that year, the humidity was fierce, and almost every night thunderstorms rolled in and drenched the place. While there was a definite lack of sunshine, there was no lack of frogs. After a rain, the chorus made such a racket that one night I recorded them. Months later, I learned of a webinar being presented by the Audubon Society on frogs and toads in Florida. I signed up for it, thinking, "Close enough. I might learn something about our noisy beach neighbors."

I did. The webinar was given by a "Frog Watch" crew based in the Naples, Florida area, whose mission it is to continuously monitor this population. A quick comparison of their downloadable "Frog and Toad Calls" list with a coastal South Carolina list reassured me about its relevance: at least nine species inhabited both regions.

Many of us are apt to regard frog calls as background noise. Not so the Frog Watch volunteers, who through extensive training and experience have acquired an acute sensitivity to amphibian communications. Their work, often done after midnight, requires them to distinguish frog calls within a cacophony of nighttime noises. The webinar presenter, Becky Speer, played recordings from frogs and toads whose vocalizations sound like chicks cheeping, not to mention bees, motors, grunts, quacks, barks and more. To complicate matters, temperature affects the sound of a call being produced.

Speer noted that a continuous noise is always made by an insect; frogs and toads use their throats to vocalize and need to occasionally draw a breath of air. She explained that only males vocalize, seeking to impress the females. She discussed the characteristics and habitats of each amphibian; half are invasive species, half are local. One surprising fact is that researchers have discovered new species based solely on their calls.

The members of our South Carolina chorus? I'm not sure of their species. Perhaps they were "Southern Toads," but I couldn't swear to it. I have no doubt, though, that I'll never listen to nighttime noises in the same way as I did before I heard this talk.