



# Amphibian and Reptile Frequently Asked Questions

## #3 - Salamanders

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## 3. Salamanders

### **3.1 Question 1: Are salamanders dangerous?**

No. Salamanders are harmless. Although some salamanders may have skin secretions that can result in a feeling of nausea if accidentally ingested. Therefore, if you have handled a salamander with your bare hands for any length of time, always wash them thoroughly afterwards.

### **3.2 Question 2: How can I distinguish a salamander from a lizard?**

Salamanders are amphibians (unlike lizards, which are reptiles). As such, they have wet, slimy skin, and no scales. They also have no claws on the end of their toes. In general, salamanders appear somewhat sluggish in their movements, unlike lizards which are quick and alert.

### **3.3 Question 3: Why do I see salamanders crossing the road during rainy spring evenings?**

Salamanders breed early in the spring. This usually involves them travelling from their hiding places beneath logs and leaf litter within a woodland to the nearest wetland. This migration often coincides with the earliest warm, spring rains. If there happens to be a road bisecting the habitat they over-wintered in from their breeding pond, they will attempt to cross the road. Many do not survive.

### 3.4 Question 4: How can I help them cross the road?

*You should only attempt this if you can do so safely.* Make sure that you pull your car well off of the road and that you are not putting yourself at risk by walking along a busy road, highway or interstate. Also if it is dark outside, only attempt this if conditions are safe AND you are wearing high visibility, reflective clothing. Once you have taken the necessary safety precautions, you can attempt to help these animals cross the road in one of two ways: (1) picking them up by hand, walking them across the road and releasing them on the other side (place them on the side of the road they were trying to get to), (2) use a bucket or container with a ¼ inch of water at the bottom to transport them across the road. If there are many salamanders trying to cross the road at once, you can more efficiently move them by placing many individuals in the bucket at a time (to reduce the number of times you have to cross the road to release them).

### 3.5 Question 5: What is a water dog?

“Water dog” is a term usually applied to one of two things: (1) a mudpuppy, which is Wisconsin’s only fully aquatic salamander species, or (2) larval salamanders, which are aquatic in their larval form. The latter will metamorphose into a terrestrial (i.e., land-dwelling) adult. Both have large bushy external gills that they use for breathing under water. When the latter reaches adulthood, it will metamorphose into a terrestrial (land-dwelling) adult.



Mudpuppy



Larval Tiger Salamander

### 3.6 Question 6: Do water dogs or mudpuppies make good fishing bait?

No. Although sometimes sold as fish bait, they typically do not live long when kept under less than ideal conditions (such as the conditions in a bait bucket) and are not cost-effective bait. Collecting them for bait can also negatively impact wild salamander populations. Collection of salamanders is also regulated by Wisconsin laws, for more information on Wisconsin DNR amphibian and reptile regulations please visit: <http://dnr.wi.gov/files/PDF/pubs/er/ER0102.pdf>.

### 3.7 Question 7: I found a salamander in my basement. What should I do with it?

If you found the salamander in the late spring, summer or early fall, simply take it outside and place it in a nearby moist woody/shrubby area under a damp log or moist leaf litter. Make sure you release it near a wetland or other water body, if possible.

If you found the animal in the winter or late fall, *do not return it to the outside (especially if conditions are cold or snowy)*. This time of year, salamanders go below ground to hibernate by either modifying existing animal burrows, following crevices in rock, soil, or root channels, or remaining under a deep layer of organic material/debris (such as dead leaves, fallen trees/logs, etc.) to avoid freezing. Returning them to the outside during these cold months will likely kill the salamander. You have several options: (1) leave the salamander where you found it in your basement and hope it returns to whatever moist crack it entered your basement through (assuming the crack was not so high that the salamander cannot climb

back up into it); (2) place it in a container with a shallow layer of water (not so deep that it's over the salamander's head) and call a nearby nature center or school to see if they would be interested in keeping the animal for educational purposes, possibly just until spring, (3) contact a wildlife rehabilitator to see if they would be interested in keeping the animal until spring, (4) contact an amphibian and reptile biologist at the WDNR to get more information if you would like to keep it yourself for the winter.

**3.8 Question 8: I was walking in the woods this spring and I came across a pond and the bottom was covered with salamanders. Why is that?**

Salamanders breed early in the spring. This usually involves salamanders travelling from beneath logs and leaf litter within a woodland to the nearest wetland. This migration often coincides with the earliest warm, spring rains. Some species are even known to cross remnants of ice/snow around the pond periphery to find open water. Because a number of species, such as the tiger salamander, spotted salamander and blue-spotted salamander breed in a small window of time, they will congregate in large numbers at breeding ponds (and have been known to "line the bottom" of the ponds where they breed).

**3.9 Question 9: Is the myth that salamanders are attracted to, resistant to, or "created" from fire true?**

No. It is difficult to say, for certain, how the perceived association between salamanders and fire arose, but it is centuries old. One possible explanation involves the salamander's fondness for moist, rotten logs. A log housing salamanders thrown onto a campfire or into a fire place would cause any salamanders living within to exit the log, lending to the belief that these amphibians were "created" from fire.

**3.10 Question 10: How can I identify a salamander I found?**

You can view pictures and descriptions of them on the Wisconsin DNR's website:

<http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/WildlifeHabitat/herps.asp?mode=table&group=Salamanders>.

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