

Blue-spotted salamander

Ambystoma laterale

There are many examples of animals that are found in our region along the Chicago River system, yet which are rarely seen. If a deer walks up you take notice; however, you could walk right by a salamander and never ever see this important part of our ecosystem. Because of their solitary nature and their nocturnal lifestyle, salamanders don't call attention to themselves and are easily overlooked.

Spotting a salamander is an exciting experience. They are amazing creatures; small, averaging about five inches in length, and well-adapted to their habitat. The blue-spotted salamander, like all salamanders, is well camouflaged against the floodplain understory; dark bluish-black with pale blue patches on the belly and sides. They are amphibians, like frogs; but unlike frogs which tend to be on the noisy side, salamanders lead a quiet life. They absorb oxygen right in through their skin, which requires that they live near water in moist surroundings.

When salamander larvae (like a tadpole for frogs) start life they have tail fins and external gills for living in the water. After just three weeks, the front and hind limbs are formed and the larvae are less than two inches long. As they transform into the adult, they lose their gills and tail fins, and leave the water. Adult salamanders have a long tail, a slender body, and four legs with long toes perfectly made for living and foraging for food along the river.

Blue-spotted salamanders live in shallow burrows, under logs, rocks, or leaves. During the warmer months they venture out frequently at night searching for food. They are carnivores, eating worms, snails, insects, centipedes, and spiders. Salamander larvae eat a wide variety of aquatic invertebrates, especially mosquito larvae. This is of great benefit to humans.

Never pick up a salamander with your bare hands and then rub your eyes. Glands on the salamander's tail produce a toxic liquid that is secreted when it is threatened. If a predator like a raccoon or fox shows any interest, the salamander will expose its tail and give the predator something foul-tasting and sticky to ponder while hopefully allowing the salamander to escape.

The biggest threats for Illinois salamanders are habitat fragmentation and habitat loss. Salamanders, and indeed all animals, benefit directly from our landscape restoration projects and will thrive further as we realize our goal of a blue-green corridor of healthy habitat along the Chicago River system. Blue-spotted salamanders are still common in Illinois and are found throughout the northeast part of the state. However, the loss of wetlands and forests is a constant threat.

