Eastern Tiger Salamander (*Ambystoma tigrinum*)

Family Ambystomatidae

Subspecies: None currently recognized

Updated 2025

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Description/Identification: Eastern Tiger Salamanders are a large, heavy bodied species of ambystomid salamander, and are the largest terrestrial salamander species in Wisconsin. Tiger Salamanders may range anywhere from 7.0 to 13.0 inches in total snout-to-tail length, or about 2.75 to 6.30 inches in snout-to-vent length. They have anywhere from 11 to 14 costal grooves along their bodies, large, broadened heads, and relatively small eyes. Tiger Salamanders also have five toes on their hind feet, and four on the front feet. Males and females are similar in appearance, although females are slightly larger in dimorphic size, and during the breeding season, males can be further distinguished by their swollen cloacal regions. Inside the mouth, eastern Tiger Salamanders have 3 different rows or groups of very tiny, vomero-palatine teeth, much more like sandpaper, which are perhaps best observed and seen under an electron microscope. Eastern Tiger Salamanders have elongated, adhesive tongues which are quickly contracted by muscles and the hyoid bone inside their mouths during feeding.

Larval Form. © NatureNorth.

Larval Tiger Salamanders are also quite large, averaging about 3.0 to 4.0 inches, and ranging in color from yellowish-green, olive-brown, to dark greenish mottled brown with large, bushy external gills. Adult Tiger Salamanders can be quite variable in color and patterns; their dorsal color may range from dark brown, dark greenish (particularly in juvenile and newly metamorphosized salamanders with darker dorsal mottling), or black with small to large, lighter irregular spots, blotches, bars, and/or reticulations varying in color from yellow or greenish-yellow, gold, brownish, to yellow-brown. The ventral or undersurfaces are usually a lighter greenish or brown in color with faint yellowish spots or blotches.

Tiger Salamanders are also commonly confused with Spotted Salamanders (*Ambystoma maculatum*), but Tiger Salamanders reach larger sizes, have more irregular or non-circular or nondiscrete spots, lighter ground color, and the presence of ventral spotting. Spotted Salamanders also do not occur in southern or

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south-central Wisconsin. No subspecies are currently recognized, but the Eastern Tiger Salamander was formerly a subspecies of the nominate form.

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Range and Distribution: Eastern Tiger Salamanders are widely distributed, occurring from extreme southern Manitoba and Ontario, Canada, south to Texas and the Mexican Plateau in Pueblo in the western edge of the range, and to the Florida Panhandle in the eastern U.S. Introduced populations also occur in the Northeastern/New England U.S., the Appalachians, eastern Canada, and in the western U.S. In Wisconsin, Tiger Salamanders generally range throughout the southern two-thirds of the state, but are most common in southeastern, southern, and south-central Wisconsin, and seem to be absent or under-documented in west-central and southwestern Wisconsin. Although disjunct populations occur in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, they are also absent from northern Wisconsin.


Ventral/Belly View. © Herps of Arkansas and Little Peppers.

Habitat: Tiger Salamanders are adaptable, and can be found in a wide variety of forested and non-forested habitats owing to their secretive, fossorial nature. Suitable breeding habitats for Tiger Salamanders can include prairie or forest kettle or pothole ponds, nearby marshes and oak savannahs, oak openings, fields or grasslands, agricultural areas and farmlands, shallow lakes, woodlots, and other types of forest or woodland habitats. They can also often be found breeding or living in a number of other artificial habitats as well including suburban areas, farm ponds, fish-rearing ponds, sewage or stormwater retention ponds, ditches, or other places similar to these.

Feeding and Diet: Both larval and adult Tiger Salamanders are primarily carnivorous, feeding on a wide variety of terrestrial and/or aquatic prey. Prey eaten by Tiger Salamanders may include insects and insect larvae, earthworms and other worms, small crustaceans, mollusks, and other invertebrates. Tiger Salamanders can be quite voracious eaters, and may also eat small vertebrate animals such as other

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amphibian eggs or larvae, or may resort to cannibalism in extreme conditions. They may even occasionally eat newborn rodents such as mice, small fish, or other small vertebrates.

Natural History: Tiger Salamanders are predominately burrowing or fossorial salamanders, emerging from their overwintering sites deep within or under rocks, logs, debris, or from underground in March or April, where they are most often observed in great numbers traveling to their breeding ponds, or from in early fall in late August through October. They will use noncelestial chemical cues to find their ways to and from their breeding ponds, and during these times, may be seen crossing roadways, sidewalks, or other open areas in fields. These large salamanders are also often observed or captured while trapped in window wells, ditches or pools, or in basements or cellars as they move to or from their breeding ponds. The thawing of the ground and melting of the ice, as well as long, warm, hard nightly rains during the spring or fall stimulate Tiger Salamander movement.

Once at their breeding ponds, mating and courtship take place where males court females, and deposit spermatophores with the females for internal fertilization, followed by egg laying taking place. Females may deposit anywhere from about 100 to over 1,000 eggs, either individually or in loose, globular masses, fastened to submerged twigs, leaf litter, or other vegetation. Larval Tiger Salamanders will then hatch in about 3 to 4 weeks, and become ready to fully develop by late summer or early fall in late August or September, where they are stimulated to leave the ponds again by warm, hard, fall rains. These mass movements of Tiger Salamanders in the fall may be entirely young of the year, or also include adults migrating back to their overwintering sites.

After egg deposition and reproduction, the adult Tiger Salamanders leave the ponds for the summer, and become very fossorial, spending most of their time underground unless incidentally excavated. Fully neotenic populations of Tiger Salamanders, where the adults remain in the breeding ponds throughout their lives while retaining juvenile larval features are also known, but are rare. In Wisconsin, neotenic populations have been documented in deep, concrete artificial ponds in which trapped salamanders are unable to escape from, thus either drowning or forcing neoteny to occur. However, once collected and brought into captivity, these neotenic populations resumed their metamorphosis into terrestrial adults shortly thereafter.

Tiger Salamanders are harmless and beneficial, although as a defense, they may attempt to bite or head-but (rarely), but much more often, will secrete irritating and foul-tasting skin secretions or copious quantities of bodily “slime” and mucous as means of discouraging a would-be predator. Larval and aquatic stages of Tiger Salamanders may be eaten and consumed by large aquatic invertebrates such as large crayfish or water bugs, fish, or other amphibians and/or predatory amphibian larvae. Many different species of birds, turtles, snakes, and carnivorous small mammals, such as shrews, weasels, and other mammals (such as skunks, opossums, raccoons, and foxes) may also eat Tiger Salamanders. Other Tiger Salamander larvae can also become cannibalistic towards one another under some circumstances as well.

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Conservation Status: In Wisconsin, eastern Tiger Salamanders are listed as “Common”. They are still regulated and protected along with all other of Wisconsin’s herptiles under N.R. 16. Eastern Tiger Salamanders are currently not protected or regulated federally. Eastern Tiger Salamanders are currently IUCN Red-List Least Concern (LC).