

The Lesser Siren (*Siren intermedia netting*)

Key Features

- Lesser Sirens are a large salamander with many neotenic traits, including exposed gill tufts throughout adult life.
- They lack hind limbs and have front limbs that have 4 toes on each foot.
- Juvenile lesser sirens have red to yellow colors banding the head and body.
- As the siren grows older these patterns fade until the plainer adult coloration is reached.
- Sexually mature lesser sirens have a dorsal pattern that is usually an olive green to grayish blue or black.
- Some individuals may have scattered spots on the dorsal surface.
- The ventral surface is usually lighter in color, tending more towards a light gray color.
- Lesser sirens can range in size from 7 to 27 inches (17 - 69 cm) depending on the subspecies



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Habitat

- Lesser sirens range from North Carolina south to southern-central Florida, west to east and southern Texas and north from Texas in the Mississippi valley to Indiana and Illinois.
- Localized colonies may also be found in southeastern Virginia, northeastern North Carolina, southwestern Michigan, and northern Indiana.
- Lesser sirens can be found inhabiting the mud and debris that are located on the bottom of still and slow moving waters such as sloughs and ponds.
- The habitat doesn't necessarily need to be a permanent body of water.

Diet

- In the wild lesser sirens feed upon snails, worms, aquatic invertebrates, and occasionally fish.
- However, while feeding a fair amount of aquatic vegetation is also ingested. The algae and vegetation tends to be poorly digested and may just be an artifact of the manner in which the sirens feed.

Young

- Sexual maturity is usually reached in two to three years depending upon the population involved. Adult males can be identified by the enlarged masseter muscles causing the temporal region of the head to appear swollen.
- During the breeding season, male lesser sirens may engage in biting behaviors. Spent females have been observed with multiple bites possibly indicating that biting is part of courtship in this salamander.
- Also, males have been observed with bite marks, indicating either mate guarding behaviors or territorial encounters.
- The breeding season is variable depending on geography, with the southern localities breeding earlier. Southern populations may start as early as December-March in central Florida and March to April in the Carolinas.
- Siren courtship and mating remain something of a mystery because they've never been observed in the wild.
- Here's what we do know: In the spring, a female western lesser siren lays somewhere between 100 and 1,500 or more (!) eggs in bottom mud or on aquatic plants. After some 45 to 75 days, the eggs hatch into larvae that are half an inch long; the larvae mature in about two years. (source St. Louis zoo)



- The eggs are deposited primarily in large masses that may consist of several layers of eggs. The eggs are a dark brown color and have a sticky gel coat adhering to each other as well as to plants, twigs, and roots.
- Lesser sirens have been collected with lesser siren eggs in their digestive tract. It is uncertain whether this is a female guarding a clutch and feeding on the eggs in her own clutch or other sirens predating upon egg clutches. It is unknown at this time if lesser sirens have internal or external fertilization of their eggs.



(c) Arnaud JAMIN

Interesting facts

- Juveniles become dormant for approximately 12 to 14 weeks before starving to death, while well-fed adults can be dormant for at least 16 weeks.
- During the summer, a siren that lives in a small body of water, like a pond or ditch, may find that its watery home is drying up. The salamander responds by spending the hot months in a dormant state.
- While many animals simply burrow underground to go dormant, the siren goes through a special "transformation" after it burrows into the bottom mud.
- As the mud dries out, the mucous on the siren's skin hardens to form a cocoon that covers the whole body, except the mouth.
- The cocoon keeps the siren from drying out, and the animal can survive like this for weeks at a time, until its habitat fills with water again.
- When it comes to coping with weather extremes, the siren has another trick. In the winter, this amphibian avoids freezing by burrowing in the water bottom and brumating -- similar to hibernating, but with periods of wakefulness.
- The western lesser siren makes at least two distinct kinds of sounds: a "yelp" when captured, and a "click" when approaching another siren. The click sound is often accompanied by head-jerking movements, and may be used to defend a territory.

