

LITTLE WYOMING

PLAINS SPADEFOOT TOAD



As early summer rains drench prairie grasslands, a unique amphibian awakens from its months-long slumber. The plains spadefoot, a native Wyoming species, spends most of its life buried in the soil, where it is protected from dry summers and freezing winters. The spadefoot earned its name because it has patches of hardened tissue on each of its back feet, which act as spades for quickly digging into the soil. Plains spadefoots usually only emerge from their underground homes on humid and raining evenings to search for foods and mates.

BROTHERS AND SISTERS GALORE

Life as a tadpole is challenging; tadpoles are vulnerable to predation, environmental change and disease. Most amphibians lay lots of eggs to ensure that at least a few babies survive to adulthood. The plains spadefoot is no exception. Female spadefoots can lay between 100 to 2,000 eggs. That's a lot of brothers and sisters!

WATCH OUT FOR CANNIBALS

Because plains spadefoots typically live in areas without permanent water, they usually breed in small, temporary ponds or water-filled ditches. The developing tadpoles have a lot of competition for space and resources. Most tadpoles eat plankton and plant debris. But some tadpoles eat a more substantial food source, such as fairy shrimp or even ... other tadpoles! These carnivorous and sometimes cannibalistic tadpoles develop more quickly than the others, which is an advantage in the dry environments where spadefoots live.

RACE TO GROW UP

Cannibals aren't the only worry for developing tadpoles. They also have to race against time! The temporary ponds that spadefoot tadpoles live in may rapidly dry up. The tadpoles can start developing faster in response to lowering water levels in their pond. While most frogs and toads take months or even years to reach metamorphosis, plains spadefoots can develop from aquatic tadpole to terrestrial metamorph in as few as 15 days!

