

# Backyard Briefs

*A weekly column*

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## The Other Kind of Siren

You may think it quite unusual for the police not to recognize a siren when they see one—but it all depends on what kind of a siren you are talking about. Recently the Bertie County Sheriff's Department called Jeff Horton, with The Nature Conservancy's Roanoke office, hoping he could identify something. Someone had brought a critter to them in a bucket, but what was it? It turns out it was a type of salamander, called a greater siren, that we rarely see because of its nocturnal habits.

These eel-like creatures have front legs with four toes, but no back legs. They are indeed unusual. This particular one was about 18 inches long but they can grow to more than 30 inches. Sirens live in wet weedy places, like the pond this one was found in, or ditches and backswamps. They sport external gills (looking much like lacy shoulder pads for their tiny arms), but they are also equipped with lungs. Though these critters never leave the water they must be prepared for survival when the pools or swamps they live in dry up.

During such periods of the year, when their watery habitat disappears, they burrow in mud, coating themselves with soapy mucus produced in their skin, forming something much like a cocoon. Using their lungs, they breathe air while they wait for rain. Sirens can survive more than five years without food and several years without water. They are able to live for such long periods because they can reduce their metabolism by as much as 70% while relying on a store of fat in their rather large bodies.

There are two types of these critters living here on our Coastal Plain, the greater and the lesser siren. The difference, as the name implies, is in size. Lesser sirens only grow to 15 inches in length. Sirens swim about in the dark waters of nighttime, eating worms, insects, crayfish and other crustaceans. They are known to live up to 25 years.

The greater siren that ended up at the Bertie County Sheriff's office was found in a pond near Lewiston. Though it was not the type of siren we usually associate with law enforcement, they have been known to yelp when caught. I wonder if this one did.