

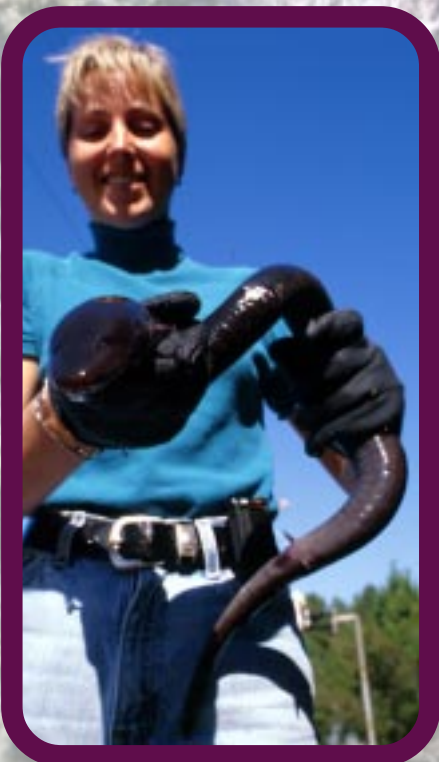


“Giant” Salamanders

Sirens and Amphiumas



When we think of salamanders, we usually think of small creatures that scurry away when we turn over rotten logs or other debris. Most people in the Southeast don't realize that southeastern wetlands are home to two groups of huge aquatic salamanders, sirens and amphiumas. Two species, the greater siren and the two-toed amphiuma, may grow to massive sizes – the largest individuals reaching more than three feet in length. These amphibians spend most of their time hiding in weed-choked wetlands, slow-moving streams, and Carolina bays. People rarely encounter these two species, although fishermen occasionally catch enormous black salamanders and assume that they are American eels (a species of fish). Amphiumas, or “congo eels” as they are often called, can be common in many southeastern wetlands. Two-toed amphiumas occur on the Coastal Plain across much of the Southeast. These animals have miniscule front and back legs with two toes on each foot. They feed on crayfish, aquatic invertebrates and other small animals that share their habitat. When wetlands dry up in extremely dry weather, these salamanders can be found deep underground in moist mud, where they remain until the wetland refills. Because sirens are similar in appearance and often occupy the same habitats as amphiumas, greater sirens are sometimes mistaken for two-toed amphiumas. Two key differences are that sirens only have front legs, and they also have feathery external gills. In general, sirens are a bit shorter than amphiumas and have a stockier body. Like amphiumas, sirens also feed on crayfish and other small animals. When wetland habitats dry, sirens go underground, and they have the ability to form a cocoon around their bodies to hold in moisture. This adaptation allows them to stay dormant in dry weather until the rains refill the wetlands. Sirens and amphiumas belong to the extensive “hidden biodiversity “ of the Southeast. It is hard to believe that two such large animals are so infrequently seen. Although these two species are fairly common, very little is known about their natural history. More research is needed to determine what role they play in the ecosystem.



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