

## **Cuban Treefrogs: An Invasive Threat. Plus, Learn Your Frog Calls- a Great Website!**

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Excerpted from University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences(IFAS) publications by Dr. Steve A. Johnson.

There have been a lot of little treefrogs on the walls near my nightlight greeting me in the morning. And you may have wondered what that squawky, creaky shoe noise was outside your window at night. Or what was causing all of the unsightly fecal deposits and droppings at the top of your window casements. Most likely it is a foreign invader, the Cuban treefrog (*Osteopilus septentrionalis*). This large species dispersed throughout southern Florida during the mid-1970s. Often they turn up in toilets. Look before you sit!



*Cuban treefrogs grow to six inches long, have warty skin and make a mess defecating around window sills. Our native treefrog species have smooth skin. (Photo by Dr. Steve Johnson UF/IFAS).*

With the return of our rainy, rainy season the Cuban treefrogs are flourishing after two dry years. Standing water is plentiful in most neighborhoods. The number of eggs a female produces is related to her size. A very large female is reported to deposit 15,000 eggs in one season! They can grow to more than six inches in length. Usually creamy white to light brown, they have large eyes and rough skin. Their skin is coated with a secretion that irritates mucus membranes, so you should not touch the animals with your bare hands.

Cuban treefrogs also cause problems for utility companies and their customers. Because the frogs like dark tight spaces, they crawl into the transformer boxes and power switches inside power poles to look for food and shelter. The frogs' bodies are large enough to connect surfaces inside the electrical equipment. When at least one



*These young Cuban treefrogs are very abundant following recent rainfall. (Photo by Dr. Kenny Krysko UFIFAS).*

surface contains an electrical charge, the connection creates a short-circuit, which can cause blackouts and damage equipment. Frog-induced short-circuits have been a problem since the mid-1990s and now cause two or three blackouts per week during the spring and fall for one Central Florida utility company. A single incident can cost up to \$10,000 in repairs.



*A Cuban treefrog makes a meal out of a native Florida treefrog.  
Photo by Brent Anderson.*

Due to the destructive effects

Cuban treefrogs have on native species of amphibians and reptiles, many biologists recommend euthanizing or killing Cuban treefrogs. That's harsh, but good advice. This invader is eating the food sources our native species eat or just plain eating their smaller native cousins such as the squirrel treefrog (*Hylas squirella*) and green treefrog (*Hyla cinera*)!

We would like to recommend a humane method of euthanasia for amphibians. Just make SURE the frog you have is a Cuban treefrog before euthanizing it. If you live in an urban area, you probably have only the Cuban treefrog. If you have some natural areas, you should learn the calls of the green and squirrel treefrogs to determine if they are nearby (see website below). The Cuban treefrog has warty skin, exceptionally large toepads and a blunt snout. The green and squirrel treefrogs have smooth skin with a distinct white line on each side of their body (a dull to bright green) and only grow to 2.5 inches and have somewhat pointy snouts. However, when they are only 1 to 2 inches long they all look pretty similar.



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*The green treefrog (*Hyla cinera*) is a native species with smooth skin and a racing stripe on each side.*

These little treefrogs are too quick to catch with a jar or baggy and I don't care to have 6 inch long treefrogs. A butterfly net might work. However, not *my* butterfly net. So, I have resorted to smacking the little guys, really sharply, with a fly-swatter in the morning. I know, I don't like it either, but the effort to preserve our natural ecosystem starts with each individual. Turning off the doorside nightlight which attracts the insect buffet these night feeding amphibians dine on will keep them out of sight and you won't have to face them as much. Occasionally people have been startled by these attack frogs as they are startled from their overhead shelter and pounce on an unsuspecting person's head or shoulders.

Another more involved technique requires purchasing a small tube of benzocaine ointment. There are several well-advertised brands as well as much less expensive store brands (generic brands). One then captures the large, more sluggish adult treefrogs while they sleep during the day up in the soffit areas of your roof. Some people seem squeamish about this. One might try using a plastic bag a net or maybe a pooper scooper or some tool to bag the invader. Once caught, simply take a strip of ointment about 1 inch long (perhaps more for larger frogs) and spread it down the midline of the neck and back of each frog. In 5-10 minutes the animal will be groggy; in 15-20 minutes it should be unconscious, and in about 30-40 minutes it will be close to dead or dead. At this point, put the frog in a plastic container and freeze it for 3 days. Why? Because we want to ensure that the frog dies -- we don't want a heavily drugged frog to be buried and wake up 2 feet underground. That would not be humane. In fact, I'd skip the lidocaine, just freeze 'em. Whoever made that recommend probably hadn't tried putting a dab of it on a treefrog. Good luck! Anyway, after 3 days, make it 5 days without the lidocaine, dispose of the carcass by burying it deep enough so that a pet or wild animal will not dig it up, or place it in a plastic bag and put it in the trash.

Freezing is a humane way to kill amphibians because their bodies go into a state of torpor (metabolism slows way down) -- just as they do in cold weather outside. If the cold weather is short in duration, the frogs will come out of their torpor state. However, after an extended time in freezing temperatures, the frogs die.

Be sure to wash your hands after handling any frog or toad. They all secrete a slimy film to protect their skin, but the secretions of some species, like the Cuban treefrog, can irritate the skin and eyes of some people.

Another way to capture Cuban treefrogs in order to eliminate them from your property is to attract the frogs to hiding places where they can be "easily" captured and removed. To do this, simply place short sections of PVC pipe in the ground around your home and garden. This technique is described in detail at: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/UW259> .

For more info and live frog songs, see Florida Wildlife Extension website <http://www.wec.ufl.edu/extension> . Click the link to "Wildlife Information" then find the link to the "Frogs & Toads of Florida" page. This website contains images of all of Florida's frogs as well as recordings of the calls of most species, including the Cuban treefrog. There are also links to many other useful wildlife related resources at the site. Also see, Dr. Steve Johnson's website <http://ufwildlife.ifas.ufl.edu> --Click the Extension link then follow the link for "Frogs and Toads". Here you will find many digital images of Cuban treefrogs and native treefrogs to aid with identification of these species.

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