

# Most amphibians can glow in the dark, scientists report

February 27 2020

DO NOT PUBLISH  
EMBARGOED TO THURS 27 16:00 GMT

## Glowing salamanders

Study finds biofluorescence much more widespread in amphibians than previously thought

### Eastern Tiger Salamander

*Ambystoma tigrinum*

As seen under white light



As seen under blue light

Photographed through a long-pass filter, which only allows fluorescent light to pass through it



picture credit: Jennifer Y. Lamb and Matthew Davis -- St. Cloud State University

Published in  
Nature - Scientific Reports  
Feb 27

The ability for organisms to glow in the dark is called **biofluorescence**

It has been seen in several species, most commonly in types of jellyfish, bugs and fish

It happens when ultra-violet or blue light is absorbed and reemitted at lower energy wavelengths

Looking at salamanders and frogs under blue light has revealed many more species with the ability to glow than previously known

### Why glow?

Simple answer: we are not sure

Theories include:

**Communication**

**Sexual selection**

**Improved visibility to each other**

**Camouflage**

Source: [nature.com/scientific-reports](https://www.nature.com/scientific-reports) © AFP

Biofluorescence is where organisms emit a glow after first absorbing light energy - and before the current study had only been observed in one salamander and three frog species

Glowing amphibians may be far more common than thought, scientists reported Thursday, suggesting that the ability may help them locate each other in low light.

Jennifer Lamb and Matthew Davis from St Cloud State University in Minnesota exposed 32 species of the frogs, salamanders, newts and eels to blue or ultraviolet light, finding that the creatures emitted colorful patterns in a process known as "biofluorescence."

These patterns ranged from blotches and stripes to glowing bones or even all-over fluorescence, in various hues of green, orange, and yellow, the authors said in a new study published in *Scientific Reports*.

Some even had fluorescent green skin secretions and urine.

Biofluorescence is where organisms emit a glow after first absorbing light energy, and before the current study had only been observed in one salamander and three frog species.

It happens through various mechanisms through the presence of fluorescent proteins in skin and bones. Some of the amphibians also have chromatophores, or pigment-containing and light-reflecting cells.

The authors wrote that many amphibians are nocturnal and inhabit dense forests, and so the ability to glow may thus help them find each other, as their eyes contain rod cells that are sensitive to green or blue light.

Biofluorescence might also create more contrast between amphibians and their environment, allowing them to be more easily detected by other amphibians.

In other species, glowing has been found to help creatures camouflage, signal themselves to potential mates, or even help them mimic the

appearance of their predators.

Last year, a different set of US researchers the molecules responsible for allowing swell sharks to glow, hypothesizing that it might perform functions other than identification, including fighting microbial infection.

**More information:** Salamanders and other amphibians are aglow with biofluorescence, *Scientific Reports* (2020). [DOI: 10.1038/s41598-020-59528-9](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-59528-9) , [www.nature.com/articles/s41598-020-59528-9](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-020-59528-9)

© 2020 AFP

Citation: Most amphibians can glow in the dark, scientists report (2020, February 27) retrieved 19 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-02-biofluorescence-widespread-amphibians.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.