

## Other Wildlife: Newts



Palmate Newt, @ Paul Sterry ([www.naturephotographers.co.uk](http://www.naturephotographers.co.uk))

Out of the seven native species of amphibian in the UK, three are newts and, if you are lucky, you have a chance of seeing them in your garden. As Clare Simm, GBW Development Officer, explains, there are plenty of things that you can do to improve the attractiveness of your garden to newts.

**You know when** you have frogs or toads in your garden due to their raucous calls. Their silent cousins, the newts, are less conspicuous but that does not mean that they are not there. The Smooth Newt (*Lissotriton vulgaris*) is the most common and widespread and is the only newt found in Northern Ireland, but in Britain, you may also find the Palmate Newt (*Lissotriton helveticus*) and the Great Crested Newt (*Triturus cristatus*).

There are also introduced 'alien' species of newt, the most common of which is the Alpine Newt (*Mesotriton alpestris*). These are becoming more widespread due to the exotic pet trade, despite the fact that it is illegal to release them into the wild. It is thought that these introduced species pose little threat to our natives in terms of competition but they are suspected to be carriers of the chytrid fungus that is rapidly killing off populations of amphibians worldwide.

### LAND VERSUS WATER

**Newts spend more** time on land than might be expected for amphibians. They breed in ponds, usually between March and June (food and weather depending). During this phase, they generally feed on aquatic invertebrates, frog spawn and the occasional tadpole. They may stay in the pond any time up until September depending on the food availability but, once

they have left the pond, they usually remain on land to feed on slugs, worms and other invertebrates

Newts are mostly nocturnal, though you may occasionally see one coming to the surface of a pond to take a gulp of air during the day. Once they return to land, they hide in damp, warm areas such as compost heaps during the day and forage at night. When temperatures plummet during the winter, they hibernate but will emerge during milder weather to forage. Seasonal arrival and departure patterns do vary each year but, this year, newts were first seen in gardens later than in previous years, potentially due to the exceptionally cold March

### ANY OLD POND?

**Garden ponds are** extremely important for the UK's amphibians, especially with a countrywide decline of natural ponds. A collaborative survey between the BTO, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust, and Froglife between 2008 and 2009 found that newts prefer large ponds in large gardens with areas in which to hide. Favoured gardens were generally in rural areas without boundary walls or buildings.

The three different newts do have slightly different preferences about where they breed. For example, Smooth and Great Crested Newts prefer less acidic water than Palmate Newts while Great Crested and Palmate Newts



Male Smooth Newt, by Katy Upton

are more sensitive to habitat disturbance than Smooth Newts.

However, it can be surprising where you will find newts. A newt monitoring survey in Kent finds newts in a disused swimming pool on a regular basis. The pool is fully shaded, with no vegetation and no obvious way of getting in and out.

### GETTING NEWTS TO SET UP HOME

There are a few simple things that can help make a garden newt-friendly:

- Aquatic vegetation in ponds where newts can lay their eggs.
- Fish-free ponds (especially goldfish) – fish may eat newt eggs and larvae.
- Vegetation near the pond's edge to provide cover.
- Wild areas in the garden to provide foraging opportunities.
- Compost heaps and log piles to provide hiding/hibernating places.

It may seem like a lot of work to attract such small creatures into your gardens but they will repay you by being your very own pesticide control, feasting on slugs and other invertebrates. Newts may not be the most visible of your garden residents, but they make a welcome addition to any garden. ■

**Great Crested Newt:** Our largest native newt – up to 15 cm in length. Breeding males have a larger crest than Smooth Newt with a distinct gap in this crest at the base of the tail. Yellower belly than other two with irregular dark spots. Females can have a thin orange line down their backs and the yellow belly extends down the bottom of the tail.



## Newt identification

Newt species are easier to identify during their breeding season (especially in the water) than during the winter, with adult males the easiest individuals to separate. So keep this handy guide for spring and see what you can spot in your garden pond!

*All those shown are males, the easier sex to identify*

**Smooth Newt (Common Newt):** Up to 10 cm long. Breeding males have an undulating crest running from head to tip of tail. Females lack this crest and are predominantly brown. Both sexes have a pale pink/orange belly with rounded dark spots and pale spotty throats.



**Palmate Newt:** Smaller than Smooth Newt – up to 9 cm long. Breeding males don't have a crest but do have a filamentous tail and webbed, dark hind feet. Female is very similar to female Smooth Newt. Pale pink/orange belly, with fewer spots than Smooth Newt and no spots on the throat.



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