

# LONDON, ESSEX & HERTFORDSHIRE AMPHIBIAN AND REPTILE TRUST

Registered Charity No. 1089466

## Exotic Amphibians

## FACT SHEET No. 13

### General Information

Several species of amphibians that do not naturally occur in Britain may be encountered in the wild today. The recent trend in warm summers and mild winters has favoured their spread and their impact on native frogs, toads and newts, as well as other wildlife, may be considerable.

The deliberate release of non-native or exotic species into the wild, including garden ponds, is an offence under the Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981) and is punishable by an unlimited fine. Alien species should be reported to your local Amphibian & Reptile Group because of the potential harm that they can pose to natural ecosystems.

A brief description of the appearance, distribution and ecology of the species most likely to be encountered is given below.

#### **American Bullfrog** (*Lithobates catesbeianus*)

A very large frog, up to 20 cm from snout to vent, that is generally an olive colour with darker blotches. They can be recognised easily by the very large eardrum behind the eye and the deep booming call of males in summer. Their voracious appetites can eliminate native common frogs from a pond and they will even eat ducklings.

They are most often found in gardens having been illegally released into the pond as tadpoles sold by water gardens and aquarists. There have been no confirmed cases of spawning in the wild in Britain but this is one species that will benefit greatly from any further warming in the climate and is already established in the Po Valley in Italy.

#### **European Green Frog** complex

A group of continental species that are all very closely related and difficult to tell apart. The commonest species are the **edible** and **marsh frogs** (*Pelophylax kl. esculentus* and *ridibundus* respectively).

All species are highly aquatic and spend most of their time either floating on the surface or basking at the edges, characteristically leaping into the water when approached. They have rather pointed snouts and appear more "pop-eyed" than the common frog, usually with some olive or even bright green colouration.

Males call with a loud "quacking" from a pair of inflatable vocal sacs at the corners of the mouth. The spread of green frogs has been very rapid in the

past decade, with animals using rivers and streams as corridors for dispersal to new ponds. They are particularly widespread in Surrey, Kent and Sussex. As the frogs are capable of taking smaller native amphibians, this increase in range may not bode well for the future.

#### **African Clawed Toad (*Xenopus laevis*)**

This species has a characteristic flattened appearance and is almost entirely aquatic. It has powerful webbed hind feet, with tiny eyes on the top of the head. Feral colonies have established following escapes from several laboratory and biological suppliers, for example in south Wales and the Isle of Wight. They will eat anything they can swallow and are capable of feeding underwater, posing a threat to native species.

#### **Midwife Toad (*Alytes obstetricans*)**

A small, dull grey-brown toad with heart-shaped or elliptical pupils. This species is remarkable because the males carry the egg string wrapped around their hind limbs until hatching. A high-pitched call gives them their other name of "bell toad". They are established at several local sites in Bedfordshire and Yorkshire but are unlikely to pose a threat to native amphibians.

#### **Alpine Newt (*Mesotriton alpestris*)**

The most brightly coloured species of European newt. Males have a sky-blue dorsal surface and a low, yellow and black crest along the back. Both sexes have an unmarked orange or yellow belly. The newts coexist in France, for example, with all three native species and colonies are found in Britain as far afield as Surrey, Scotland, Newcastle and London.

#### **Italian Crested Newt (*Triturus cristatus*)**

Very similar to the rare and strictly protected native great crested newt. It is capable of hybridisation and causing "genetic pollution" of our native species. For this reason, suspected Italian crested newts should be reported to your county Amphibian & Reptile Group immediately as confirmation of this species requires some field experience. Italian crested newts are usually a light brown to olive colour, with fewer white speckles on the flanks and fewer, larger dark grey blotches on the belly than the great crested newt.

#### **Further Information**

If in doubt about the identification of any exotic species, contact your county Amphibian & Reptile Group for further advice.