

# LONDON, ESSEX & HERTFORDSHIRE AMPHIBIAN AND REPTILE TRUST

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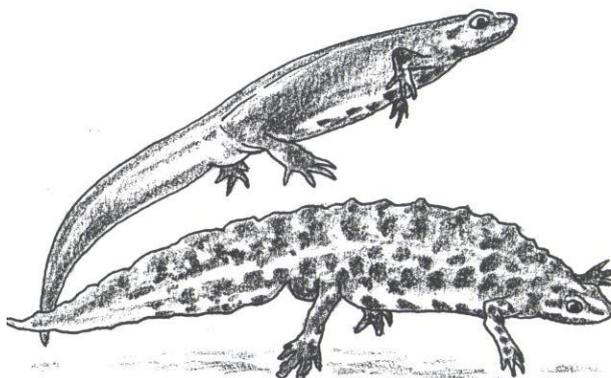
## Smooth Newt (*Lissotriton vulgaris*)

## FACT SHEET No. 2

### Recognition

Adults: 8 - 11 cm. Males in the breeding season have a tall, slightly ridged, wavy crest running from the head to the tip of the tail. They are a greyish to brown colour on the back.

Females tend to be browner and, unlike the similar palmate newt, have a speckled throat. Both sexes have a creamy-yellow/orange belly with black spots or blotches.



### Status & Distribution

The most widespread newt that is found throughout Britain and Ireland, although it is rarer in the west and at altitude.

### General Ecology

Like all British newts, the adults spend the bulk of the year on land, living in shady, moist habitats, such as hedgerows, damp grassland, scrub and woodland. It is also common in gardens, feeding at night on slow-moving invertebrate prey, such as worms, slugs and insect larvae. It hibernates on land in frost-free crevices or deep in leaf litter.

In the spring, between January and March, depending on weather conditions and location, adults return to their ponds to breed. A wide variety of still water bodies are chosen, with small farm and garden ponds being particularly favoured.

The males develop heightened colours and a wavy crest to attract females. They display to them with a stereotyped series of tail whips, waves and fans in a courtship 'dance'. At the end of the dance, the female accepts the sperm packet on the floor of the pond. Several days later she begins to lay eggs that are carefully wrapped in the leaves of water plants. Many matings may occur in a season and several hundred eggs may be laid before most of the newts leave the pond at the end of June.

The eggs hatch after a fortnight into tiny, carnivorous tadpoles, with feathery gills. They grow to only about 4 cm long before metamorphosing in mid-summer and leaving the pond. They remain terrestrial for about 2 years and return to the pond when mature to breed. Smooth newts are eaten by many predators, especially large fish, grass snakes and herons, but any carnivore that is large enough will take them and few survive beyond five years.

### **Conservation**

The Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981) only protects the smooth newt from collection at its breeding ponds for sale. It is considered to be sufficiently common not to warrant specific conservation measures against killing and injuring or habitat protection. They survive well in garden ponds and this has compensated in part for the substantial losses of rural ponds.

Although the population will be limited by fish predation in many ponds, the tadpoles remain concealed in weed and, unlike great crested newts, fish rarely wipe out entire colonies. An ideal garden pond for smooth newts will consist of areas of vegetation to provide cover for the adults and invertebrate food, a log pile or leaf litter for hibernation and a fish-free, well vegetated pond. Newts eat many pests and are of benefit to all gardeners.

### **Frequent Questions**

*Where can I get some newts for my pond?*

In most areas, newts will find a suitable new pond within a few years. If the surroundings are not suitable for colonisation, e.g. arable monoculture or major roads, some adults may be introduced. Unlike frogs and toads, they will probably stay to breed, although a second 'booster' introduction may be made the following spring. The larger great crested newt is strictly protected, cannot be handled without a licence and is unlikely to survive if introduced to garden ponds.

*How can I watch newts dance?*

At any time during the breeding season, newts will be displaying. This is a fascinating aspect of their behaviour to watch. It is possible to observe it during the day but is more easily seen on a warm, still night with a torch. The females may also be watched wrapping their eggs in water plants at the same time. Remember, children should always be supervised at ponds.

### **Further Information**

Newts of the British Isles

Reptiles and amphibians in Britain

P. Wisniewski

D. Frazer

Shire Publications

Collins New Naturalist