

LONDON, ESSEX & HERTFORDSHIRE AMPHIBIAN AND REPTILE TRUST

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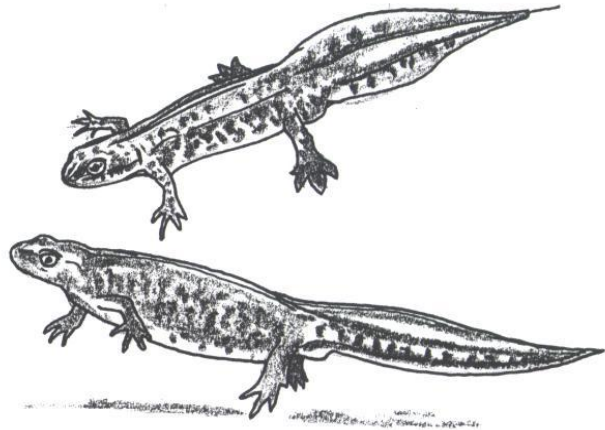
Palmate Newt (*Lissotriton helveticus*)

FACT SHEET No. 3

Recognition

Adults: 6 - 9 cm. The smallest of the three native British newts. Males in the breeding season have a low ridge along the back, a truncated tail with a thin black filament emerging from the tip and sooty, webbed hind feet.

The dorsal colour is olive or sandy brown, often with light spots. The ventral surface is light yellow with a few spots. The throat is uniformly unspotted and pinkish - diagnostic feature separating females from the very similar female smooth newts.



Status & Distribution

They occur widely in the British Isles, although showing a preference for western areas, and are most abundant in Wales, western England and Scotland. They are uncommon in central and eastern England and do not occur in Ireland. They may be the only newts at altitude, in acid bogs or on heathland but seem to avoid chalky soils.

General Ecology

Like all British newts, the adults spend most of the year on land, living in shady, moist habitats, such as hedgerows, damp grassland, scrub, woodland and also acid moorland and heath. They are active at night feeding on slow-moving invertebrate prey, such as worms, slugs and insect larvae.

In the spring, depending on weather conditions and location, adults return to small water bodies, such as farm and garden ponds or bogs, to breed.

The males develop heightened colours, a small crest and webbed feet to attract females. A courtship 'dance' is performed to the female, involving a rapid fanning of the tail and slower periods of waving the tail. The female follows the male at the end of the dance and accepts the sperm packet from the floor of the pond. Internal fertilisation occurs and several days later she

begins to lay eggs, carefully wrapping them singly in the leaves of water plants with her hind legs. Up to 400 eggs may be laid and both sexes usually leave the pond in early summer.

The eggs hatch into tiny, carnivorous tadpoles, with feathery external gills, and, unlike frog or toad tadpoles, the front limbs of newts develop first. The tadpoles are a light brown colour and indistinguishable from those of the smooth newt. They metamorphose in mid-summer and leave the water, leading a terrestrial existence until mature, usually in the spring of their second year. Adults are taken by any carnivores large enough to catch them.

Conservation

The Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981) only protects the palmate 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. Like the smooth newt, they have to some extent offset losses in the countryside, due to pond destruction and drainage of wetlands, by using garden ponds where water conditions are suitable (see below). Its ability to utilise upland sites has also allowed it to survive in these areas that are often less developed by man.

Although lacking legal protection, in some areas it may be rarer than the fully protected great crested newt (see Fact Sheet 1). The reasons for this are poorly understood but recent work suggests that dissolved minerals in the water may affect its survival or breeding success.

Frequent Questions

What is the ideal garden for palmate newts?

Like all newts, the palmate performs a valuable biological pest control service and it is worth encouraging newts in the garden for this, as well as for conservation reasons. An ideal garden will contain a small fish-free pond, as well as plenty of cover on land for the secretive adults.

How can I watch newts dance?

This is one of the most interesting examples of animal courtship that it is possible to watch in the garden. In spring the newts will display throughout the day and night but using a torch on a warm, still night will show them more clearly. Remember that children should always be supervised at ponds.

Further Information

Newts of the British Isles

P. Wisniewski

Shire Publications

Reptiles and amphibians in Britain

D. Frazer

Collins New Naturalist