

## Bexley species spotlight

Joseph Johnson

Newts: smooth newts, palmate newts and great crested newts.



Smooth newts found on the southern marsh at Crossness nature reserve. In some areas in Bexley these animals can be found in quite large numbers, as shown here.

Newts are very close to my heart. My love of animals really got going when, for my 6<sup>th</sup> birthday, my parents bought me a pair of adult Spanish ribbed newts. I still have the pair today, meaning they are over 14 years old. Recently, my interest in newts has been all about finding them in the wild. Unfortunately, amphibian populations have been decreasing quite significantly due to the spread of fungus disease (particularly chytrid fungus) but Bexley is still home to the three British native species: smooth newts (*Lissotriton vulgaris*), palmate newts (*Lissotriton helveticus*) and great crested newts (*Triturus cristatus*). These insectivorous animals are rarely seen due to their secretive nature and ability to squeeze under rocks, leaf litter and wood piles, where they live and also hibernate. The three different types of native newts are often confused with one another and with common lizards (*Zootoca vivipara*). However, if you look in the right places they can be found relatively easily, particularly the most widespread of the three: the smooth or common newt.



Photo by David Hollis – Beautiful male Smooth newt

Smooth newts *Lissotriton vulgaris*:



Smooth newt photo by Matt Legg

Smooth newts are by far the most common newts and one of the most abundant of all amphibians in Great Britain. That is no different here in Bexley. Smooth newts have good numbers on many sites here and if you know where to look they can be easy to find. The reason for this is, apart from when breeding or very young, these animals are almost completely terrestrial, spending their lives hidden under rocks or artificial cover, leaf litter and woodpiles.

Newts can be tricky to tell apart, however if you are aware of their different characteristics, it becomes much easier. Smooth newts are small/medium sized newts that achieve a body length of around 6cm. However it's not the size which will enable you to distinguish them. It is the colour. Smooth

newts have a bright orange colouring, with black speckles, on their bellies. It is slightly trickier to tell them apart if spotted underwater, although males do develop large dorsal crests in the breeding season. Sometimes they are confused with common lizards, but smooth newts are a lot slower in movement than the fast and flexible common lizard which will run for cover if you get anywhere close to them, and do not have scaly skin. The slower paced smooth newt is more likely to just sit motionless when uncovered.

These animals can be found all over Bexley, with the Thames marshes being a great place to spot them. They can be found around most water sources, and live and breed in many gardens and allotment sites across the borough as well as large parks like Danson (breeding was confirmed in the old English garden, Danson Park last year).



Smooth newt photo by Matt Legg

Palmate newts *Lissotriton helveticus*:

Palmate newts are the smallest of the three native species here in Bexley and not anywhere near as common as their slightly larger cousin the smooth newt. These animals aren't as commonly seen as smooth newts not just because of their population numbers but due to their habitat preference. Whilst smooth newts can be found in a huge range of habitats including around garden ponds and allotments, palmate newts prefer more wild areas and are also far more aquatic, being found predominantly in shallow ponds.

Although they are the smallest of the three native species, size isn't the easiest way to distinguish them. Once again, the under-belly colouration is the easiest way. Palmate newts have a light pale orange colouration underneath with no spots or speckles (although smooth newts with no spots may occasionally be found). The male of this species also develop a strange filament (appendage) on the end of their tails, in the breeding season, and black hind foot webbing, which can make them easy to distinguish when seen underwater.

Palmate newts are found in far fewer sites than the more common smooth newt, with records confined to Lesnes Abbey Woods, a neighbouring allotment site and Joydens Woods. They have also been found just outside Bexley in Oxleas Woods. At one time they must have occurred at a number of sites between these areas, and as with most native Bexley animal species, if we continue to redevelop our beautiful natural areas, it will become more and more difficult to find this species here in Bexley.

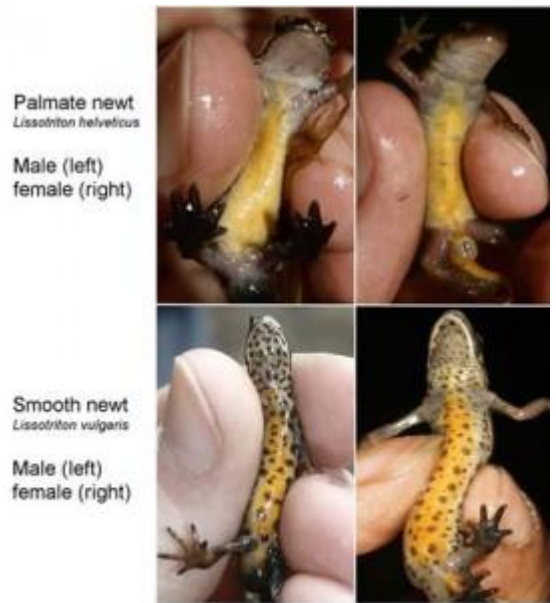


Photo guide by the shropshire amphibian and reptile group



Palmate newt male – Photo by David Hollis

If you are not sure whether you have newts in your garden pond, going out and looking after dark with a torch is a good way to check as they are more likely to be swimming out in the open away from the cover of water plants.

Great crested newts *Triturus cristatus*:

Great crested newts are our largest native newt in size and, despite their rarity, the best known and most commonly publicised image of the newt species in Great Britain. The numbers of great crested newts has declined significantly in recent years, and it has disappeared from many areas where it once thrived. The species survives in the south of Bexley where additional ponds have been reated in a bid to boost numbers.



Photo by David Hollis

Great crested newts are probably the easiest newt to identify as they have many characteristics that set them apart from their smaller, more common cousins. As well as being significantly larger, this species is far darker in colour than the other native newts and has very 'warty' skin with distinctive white speckles along their flanks. Their bellies are a bright orange.

Great crested newts are said to stray much further from their breeding grounds than the other two newt species (which tend to live and breed near the same water source). Great crested newts can be found far away in a diversity of habitats in late summer, after they breed, including: woodland and even gardens (this may be the best time to find great crested newts).

This species is protected by both domestic and European legislation from reckless or intentional killing or injury, disturbance likely to affect survival or breeding and from destruction of habitat - except that there is a get-out allowing for 'developers' given planning permission to translocate animals to other sites.



Female Great crested newt – Photo by David Hollis

### Other newts and similar animals:

As mentioned earlier, newts are often confused with common lizards (*Zootoca vivipara*). However, the common lizard is far quicker in movements than a newt and they are very unlikely to be found in Bexley gardens. The United Kingdom is also home to an invasive newt species, the alpine newt (*Ichthyosaura alpestris*). This very beautiful European species is easily identified by its beautifully bright colouration. Alpine newts have never been recorded here in Bexley. However, their population is apparently increasing and, with the original population being found not a million miles away from us in Surrey, and the fact that it is still thought to survive at an old release site in Kidbrooke, it is possible these animals could one day be found here. Any new introductions of these animals could be a massive threat to our native amphibians through fungus diseases. Please let us know if you see any here in Bexley.

### Proposed development at crossness nature reserve

### Other threats:

As with all amphibians, the spread of fungal diseases are their biggest global threat as these diseases have massively affected amphibians all over the world and have caused extinction locally and, in some cases, completely. The spread of non-native species could also affect native newts as these animals can also help spread disease and out-compete our native species for resources. However, as I have mentioned in spotlights before, habitat destruction or development is



the biggest threat to all Bexley's animals, including amphibians. The Thames marshes are one of the best places for newts in the borough and as both of our marshlands (Erith and Crayford) are under threat from development, their newt populations have an uncertain future.

### Tadpoles & larvae:

It's worth noting that as amphibians, these animals start off as tadpoles, and they can be distinguished from frog and toad tadpoles by the fact newt's front legs develop first whilst frog and toads back legs develop first. Until they are ready to leave the water they are generally pale to translucent and hard to see. The larvae of newts have a frill of gills behind their head too. The spawn (eggs) of newts are slightly different too. Toad and frog spawn are well known, large clumps of eggs laid on top of the water or in strings under it. Whilst on the other hand newt eggs are laid singularly on aquatic plants underwater. You can attract newts (particularly smooth newts) to your garden to live and breed with the addition of a wildlife pond, however you would want to leave it free of fish as they would eat the larval newts.

Thank you for reading, I hope people have a new found respect for these rather enchanting and interesting little animals and hope people keep a close eye out for them both in our borough's beautiful natural areas and your own gardens. For those interested the next spotlight shall be ready very soon. The photography was supplied by myself (Joseph Johnson), fellow herper Matt Legg and wildlife photographer and film maker David Hollis (from <http://www.wild-scape.co.uk>).

Joseph Johnson.