

Amphibians and Reptiles in Oxfordshire

There are only nine species of native amphibians and reptiles found in Oxfordshire - with occasional records of other escaped or deliberately released species (e.g. Terrapins). The native species are:

- Common Frog
- Common Toad
- Common (or Smooth) Newt
- Palmate Newt
- Great Crested (or Warty) Newt
- Common Lizard
- Slow-worm
- Grass Snake
- Adder or Viper

Most of these species are easily recognised, apart perhaps from the two small species of newts. For such a relatively well-known group of animals we know little about the size of populations or even where they are found.

The Common Frog and Common Toad are well known, and easy to see and hear because of their prominent and sometimes noisy breeding displays in the spring. Frogs especially are familiar and mostly welcome visitors to suburban gardens and wild places alike. Toads although usually more fussy as to where they breed, are also common visitors and as Frogs, perform a great service by eating unwanted garden pests such as slugs and snails. Newts, the other group of amphibians, are more secretive. They are usually seen in ponds in the early summer, and during the day they may be seen briefly coming up for air before quickly dropping to the bottom of the pond again. However, they are more active at night - patrolling for mates or searching for food. Smooth Newts are the most common and widespread of the three species. The other small species, the Palmate Newt, is more restricted and usually found in areas with more acidic water. The larger Great Crested Newt, nearly twice the length of the small newts is usually more secretive being almost entirely nocturnal. Although heavily protected (Britain is home to a large percentage of the world population) it is in fact not as rare as most people would think, and in Oxfordshire is in fact more common than the Palmate Newt. Many human encounters with newts occur on land, when they are found hiding under stones or logs, down drains or similar dark sheltered locations. These are good places to live outside the breeding season, when the animals are not in the pond.

Refuges on land are important places for all amphibians, providing safe places, which act as a base for their terrestrial summer existence or hibernation sites in the winter. They can share these winter and summer terrestrial sites with reptiles. In the spring and summer the reptiles you are most likely to encounter are Slow-worms, a legless lizard that look a bit snake-like - or the Grass Snake which can vary in colour from green to brown, but usually has a prominent yellow collar. These two reptiles are the most widespread and common species in Oxfordshire, being found in most habitats and areas of the county including, if you are lucky, gardens. Grass Snakes are good swimmers and one of their favourite items of prey is the frog, which they hunt both in and out of water.

However most people never see even these relatively widespread species, because like all reptiles they are shy and would rather run away than face up to any threat, real or otherwise. The other two reptiles are the Common Lizard, a typical lizard which when encountered, is often sunning itself in warm dry places such walls, bare ground or piles of dead grass. It too will usually run off rather than be caught - probably before it is even seen. If you are really lucky you might see an Adder, which often lives alongside the Common Lizard. The Adder, is a creature with an entirely unwarranted reputation, it will always run away. Both species are uncommon in Oxfordshire – the Adder especially so and believed to be surviving in only a handful of places. These two species seem to be even more sensitive to habitat loss and disturbance than the other species, the Grass Snake and Slow-worm.

With so few species of amphibian and reptile around why is that we don't know more about them? The so called "common" British reptiles and amphibians have generally been little studied, when compared with their rarer British cousins, the Sand Lizard, Smooth Snake and Natterjack Toad (none of which currently occur in Oxfordshire). The Great Crested Newt is better studied because of the significance of the British population in an international context. In a typical inland county, such as Oxfordshire, little attention has been paid to either amphibians or reptiles. There have only been two surveys in Oxfordshire. The first review of their status was in the Victoria County History. The second published survey, the first mapped atlas of the county, was compiled by the Oxfordshire Biological Record Centre (OBRC) in 1983. This 1983 atlas highlighted the lack of recording, with very few records being sent to the Records Centre. Even a very common species, such as the Common Frog is apparently rare. This is probably most likely because it is such a common species, which nobody thinks it is worthwhile recording. The atlas also highlighted a bigger problem, that of habitat loss which is a critical cause of the decline in both amphibians and reptiles, both common and rare.

Other national surveys have been made since 1983, and have compiled some additional information about Oxfordshire. Ponds have received some attention in recent years and therefore there is a bit more information available on amphibians at least – although even this is very patchy. Thus still relatively little is known about all amphibians and reptiles, and much of the existing information is either out of date or needs confirmation. There are suspicions that even once very common species such as the Common Frog are declining. In Oxfordshire, probably the most rare species are the Adder (because of habitat loss and unnecessary persecution) and the Palmate Newt because of the lack of suitable (acidic) breeding ponds – most of Oxfordshire soils and underlying rocks being neutral or calcareous). There is circumstantial evidence that Common Toads are declining – with large scale road deaths perhaps being part of the problem. There has also been a lot of publicity about mass frog deaths, partly because of disease. Indeed amphibians are declining the world over - they seem to be acting as a warning of what we (human beings) are doing to the world.

If we are going to be able to look after our nine species of native amphibian and reptile in Oxfordshire we need to know where they are, and have some idea of how large or small the populations are. Thus the Oxfordshire Reptile and Amphibian Group is undertaking a survey of ALL species, looking for both historical and current records to establish where species are found and from where they have been lost. A simple recording form is available if you would like to be involved with this survey. All records, even if it is a Frog or Toad visiting your garden are welcome and useful.

If you are interested in finding out more about your local amphibians and reptiles, contact the Oxfordshire Reptile and Amphibian Group, see below. This group, is one of many county based groups across Britain, we are not only interested in recording and finding out where they are still to be found but also advising interested people on amphibian and reptile related issues

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