

## Turvey Newts

This article was prompted by the remarkable sight (for me) of a Kingfisher in Abbey Park downing an adult Smooth Newt on 9<sup>th</sup> January this year. This is my earliest record ever of a newt back in its breeding pond.

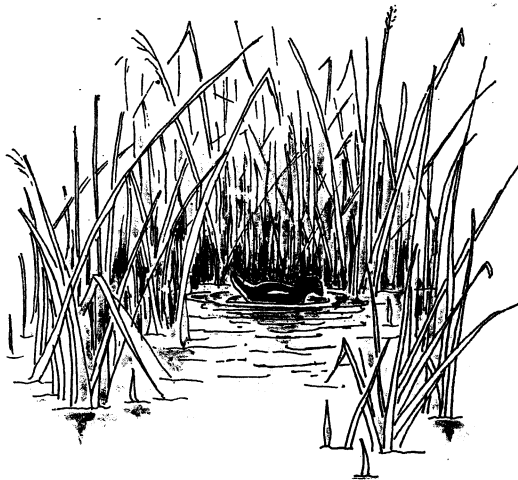
At first I thought the Kingfisher had caught a small fish , but when it flew closer and perched on the branch of a nearby tree and spent several minutes attempting to dispatch its catch by banging it vigorously against the branch I realised this was something different. The giveaway were the four little feet, and it was somewhat disconcerting watching the last pair of these slowly disappearing from sight as the Kingfisher eventually gulped the newt down head first.

The Kingfisher was there because the river was in flood and the newt was almost certainly a Smooth Newt because of its relatively small size and the absence of Palmate Newts from Bedfordshire – they prefer more acidic countryside. The only other newt we have is the Great Crested or Warty Newt y which can grow to a length of 14 cm for males and 18 cm for females: too big perhaps for a Kingfisher, though not too big for a Heron.

Smooth Newts can reach 11cm, but are often considerably smaller. Both newts are widespread locally, perhaps in most ponds, though there may be some conflict with other amphibians and certainly with fish. We have both species in the Abbey grounds and it's not unusual to find immatures, and occasionally adults, hidden under stones or in the soil during the winter months. Both species are usually back in their ponds by March, and they seem to survive in even the smallest patch of water as long as there's cover and food, primarily aquatic invertebrates. The adult male Smooth Newts spend more time in the water column than the Great Crested and come up for air more often. The adult Great Crested seems to spend longer on the bottom finding food in or on the leaf litter or other detritus.

Both species have terrific orange bellies in the breeding season and the males have a wavy crest along the back and tail. The adult females are less colourful but the female Great Crested is still an impressive beast. We used to collect both species by the dozen as children on the outskirts of Portsmouth in what was really only a roadside ditch. 'Here be dragons' attracted children from miles around.

The eggs of both species are laid singly usually on vegetation but occasionally on stones, and hatch into tadpoles with feathery gills. The Great Crested tadpole is, not surprisingly, the larger of the two and can also be told by a scattering of black spots along the tail and sometimes on the body. I've seen them in several ponds locally both north and south of the A428. Although it's now an offence to collect the Great Crested it's still great fun tracking them down and watching them. The courtship of the Smooth Newt can be seen in daylight but the Great Crested is generally active at night. Some warm clothes and a torch with a red bulb, should do the trick.



Br. John