



Advice for land managers

European protected species: What you need to know about great crested newts

Location

The great crested (or warty) newt *Triturus cristatus* is **widespread across lowland England** apart from the extreme southwest. The species is absent or **rare in upland areas, highly urbanised areas and areas with a very low pond density**. Like most amphibians, it breeds in water and spends a large proportion of its life on land. For breeding it prefers small to medium sized ponds that are un-shaded, fish-free and have substantial aquatic plant cover. Great crested newts often form meta-populations, i.e. a series of sub-populations that are linked by dispersal of individual newts. Great crested newts often inhabit ponds that are part of a 'pond cluster', and individuals move between ponds with varying frequency.



Habitat

Most great crested newt breeding ponds in England are field **ponds in arable or pastoral settings**. The species may also be found in a range of other pond types, and the largest populations are recorded from ponds formed in **abandoned workings**, such as chalk or clay pits. On land, great crested newts can be found in a range of habitats, with large numbers often found in **ancient woodland, scrub and rough grassland** where there are suitable ponds nearby.

Lifecycle

Adult newts emerge from **hibernation** around February, depending on local climate, and head towards ponds where **breeding occurs from around March to June**. Females lay eggs individually on the leaves of aquatic plants. Eggs hatch out after around two weeks, and larvae then take around 12 weeks to complete metamorphosis, at which time they leave the pond as juveniles (or efts). It then takes two to four years to reach sexual maturity, during which time some immature newts may disperse towards ponds further away. Some newts will return to the pond where they were laid as eggs. Great crested

newt may disperse several hundred metres, sometimes over 1km, from the breeding pond, though at most sites the majority of the population is normally found within around 100m of it.

Adults grow to around 17cm maximum length. Larvae feed on small aquatic invertebrates such as water fleas *Daphnia*. Immature and adult newts will take mainly invertebrates and larval amphibians; they may feed both on land and in the water.

The great crested newt has undergone serious declines in England since the middle of the twentieth century. Declines have been mainly due to the loss of breeding ponds, reduction in breeding pond suitability (notably through shading and fish introduction) and fragmentation of habitats. Although the species may still be found in up to around 40% of ponds in some local areas, it has been lost from many ponds, and most populations are at a reduced size and viability.

Legal protection

The great crested newt is **strictly protected** under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) and the Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations 1994 (as amended). Capturing, disturbing, injuring and killing newts is prohibited, as is damaging or destroying their breeding sites and resting places (note that this is a simplified summary of the legislation; see other texts for details).

Great crested newts and farming

Common farming operations can have both positive and negative effects on great crested newts. Most of the breeding sites in England were originally created by agricultural activity. Subsequent periodic management of these ponds kept them in sound condition for the species. Conversely, many farming activities will inevitably kill individual newts or damage resting places. However, so long as there is no large scale loss of high quality habitat and breeding ponds are kept intact, small scale losses of newts or their resting places is unlikely to compromise populations.

If an activity is likely to result in an offence (such as disturbing newts), there are several options to allow the work to go ahead lawfully:

- Avoid carrying it out
- Alter the methods or timing to reduce the chance of committing an offence
- Obtain a licence to allow otherwise unlawful activities.

A licence application would need to demonstrate that (1) the authorised activities are for a specified purpose (most commonly over-riding public interest or conservation), (2) there is no satisfactory alternative, and (3) the activities would not compromise the conservation status of the species. Some activities would require habitat creation to offset damage or destruction, in order to meet the third test.

Great crested newts and agri-environment schemes

For agri-environment agreements (e.g. Environmental Stewardship), ensuring the optimal timing of work will generally be the best approach, (as avoidance may not be compatible with the aims of the agreement).

As general guidance, **invasive works on breeding ponds are best done during November to January**, as newts are unlikely to be present (most great crested newts hibernate on land).

Common activities that might involve offences include:

- Ploughing close to breeding ponds
- Removal of dense vegetation using methods that involve ground disturbance
- Removal of materials (dead wood, rubble etc) piled on the ground
- Renovation of buildings where ground excavations are involved.

ES options and capital items, where careful timing and planning will be essential to minimise the risk of committing an offence where great crested newts occur, include the following:

- Maintenance and restoration of woodland and wood pasture (HC07, HC08, HC13)
- Maintenance and restoration of successional areas and scrub (HC15, HC16)
- Maintenance, restoration and creation of semi-improved or rough grassland (HK15, HK16, HK17)
- Restoration of forestry areas to lowland heathland (HO03)
- Maintenance and restoration of ponds (HQ01, HQ02, PR, PRP)

Common activities that are very unlikely to result in offences include:

- Tree surgery, pollarding and coppicing
- standard management of fish ponds, duck ponds and narrow ditches
- standard hedge, fence and stone wall management
- mowing grassland that has minimal tussock or thatch structure
- mowing most grass swards to a height of c 15cm.

Contact us

If you have internet access please read our Frequently Asked Questions section on our Internet page: <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/conservation/wildlife-management/licensing/habsregs.htm>

For questions regarding Wildlife Licensing please telephone 0845 6014523 (local rate) or email: wildlife@naturalengland.org.uk

If you have any concerns about your agri-environment agreement and its impact on Great Crested Newts please contact your local Natural England adviser. If you do not know your local adviser or for any other enquiries please contact the Natural England Helpline on 0845 600 3078 or email enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk