

Amphibians and Reptiles in the Garden

By Kathleen Olson

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When inviting wild creatures and their melodies into your garden, why not think beyond those of a feathered nature? Our water-rich environment is a natural home to garden-friendly amphibians and reptiles—and some of them even sing. Every February in Skagit County a well-recognized chorus of deafening kreek-eecking begins the call for spring: The tree frogs are ready for love!

Amphibians such as frogs and salamanders, along with reptiles such as garter snakes and turtles, are among the best eco-sensitive garden helpers around. They have voracious appetites for the very things we gardeners battle: slugs, beetles, ants and flying insects of all types. And, just as we can encourage birds to visit by planting native fruits and berries, there are easy ways to make our gardens more hospitable to these pest-eating allies.

THE AMPHIBIANS

Pacific Tree (Chorus) Frogs

The most common frog of the Pacific Northwest, the Pacific Treefrog (*Hyla regilla*), creates a chorus of sound when males join together kreek-eecking their mating call in late winter. Listen for their love song in mid-February, just in time for Valentine's Day.

This tiny 1- to 2-inch frog is a voracious insect eater. While treefrogs are often bright green, don't be surprised when you see brown, speckled or other variants. Also, treefrogs have the ability to change color to protect themselves. The color change is believed to be triggered by light levels, rather than the color of the leaf or ground they are near.



The most common frog of the Pacific Northwest, the Pacific Treefrog is often bright green. But don't be surprised if you see brown, speckled or other variants. Photo by Jason Miller.

Pacific Treefrogs are a very important "keystone" species, meaning that many other wild creatures prey on this species for survival. They are also Washington State's official frog. Pacific Treefrogs need ponds during the mating season, but often roam a sizeable distance (perhaps 300 yards) once that phase of their life is completed. They are actually more commonly seen on the ground than in trees. No matter what color they are, you can recognize them by their sticky toe pads and the dark stripe that runs from the nostril, through the eye and past the ear. No other frog in Skagit County has these traits.



Washington State's official frog, Pacific Treefrogs need ponds during the mating season, but often roam up to 300 yards once that phase of their life is completed. Photo by Tito Messerli.



A pair of Pacific Treefrogs cozy up on a Goldsturm Rudbeckia blossom.
Photo by Dyvon Havens.

Western Toad

While frogs have smooth moist skin, toads are known for their dry, bumpy appearance. Look for the Western Toad (*Anaxyrus* (formerly *Bufo*) *boreas*) in meadows or marshy areas of your garden. The Western Toad is a medium size, as toads go, 2–5 inches at maturity.

Like other amphibians, these toads can be encouraged by offering them places to live. Add a rotting log, some stones near a small water source, or even a toad house (look in local garden stores) to your garden if you see one of these fellows, and he may be willing to stay. Since toads live for six years or more, once one becomes a resident, you will be able to count on his help controlling slugs and bugs for some time.

Populations of the Western Toad are dramatically declining. They were found in Skagit County as of the last census, which was taken a few years ago. You can identify a toad by its dry, wart-covered skin and a distinct light stripe running down the middle of its back (the very small juveniles may not show a stripe).

If you get lucky enough to see one, please document the location, take a photo and e-mail it to Marc Hayes, a senior research scientist with the Habitat Program at the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, at marc.hayes@dfw.wa.gov. Hayes will use this information to track the species and assist with its survival.



Look for the Western Toad in meadows or marshy areas of your garden. If you get lucky enough to see one, you can identify it by its dry, wart-covered skin and a distinct light stripe running down the middle of its back.
Photo by Tito Messerli.

American Bullfrog

While habitat loss is a likely factor in the decline of Western Toads, a more severe threat is posed by another resident amphibian, the American Bullfrog (*Rana catesbeiana*). While native to some parts of the U.S., notably the southern states, this species has been introduced here and has thrived. The Bullfrog preys on the Western Toad and on another now rare Pacific Northwest species, the Western Pond Turtle. Both of these native species have been very seriously affected by the Bullfrog, to the extent that some government entities are recommending eradication in certain geographic areas. These frogs are large (easily weighing in at a pound as adults), so they are often mistaken as toads. However, on observation you will notice their characteristic smooth frog skin, and webbing between some toes on their hind feet, neither of which are toad features.



While native to some parts of the U.S., the American Bullfrog has been introduced to the Pacific Northwest and has thrived, aggressively preying on the Western Toad and the now rare Western Pond Turtle. Photo by Tito Messerli.

Newts and salamanders

These shy creatures usually are found sleeping under rocks or logs in my garden. The Long-toed Salamander (*Ambystoma macrodactylum*) is common, and can be identified by a dull yellow to tan stripe that runs along its back, along a dark grey body. The Rough-skinned Newt (*Taricha granulose*) is a lovely rust color with a lighter underbelly. Their skin is actually quite rough and is easily distinguishable from the shiny skin of the salamander. Both of these garden-friendly amphibians eat insects, worms, tiny slugs and tadpoles.



Garter snakes are the most common reptile in the United States. They are hard-working assistants, preying on a wide variety of garden pests, including slugs, insects, frogs, fish and even voles and mice. Photo by Tito Messerli.

THE REPTILES

Garter snakes

Garter snakes are the most common reptile in the United States. Here in Skagit County you will probably see the Northwestern Garter Snake (*Thamnophis ordinoides*) or Common Garter Snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*). Often called garden or gardener snakes, these reptiles are hard-working

assistants since they prey on a wide variety of garden pests. Garter snakes are carnivores and will eat anything they can overcome, including slugs, insects, frogs, fish and even pesky rodents like voles and mice. Garter snakes are completely harmless to humans. Though they do vary enormously in background color from brown to grey to black, you can easily recognize them by their three visible stripes. Here in the Northwest our species of garter snake are frequently gregarious; in my garden I find groups of them sunning themselves on top of the compost pile. The next time one of these sleek, striped beauties surprises you in the garden, take a deep breath and wish her happy hunting.

Turtles

The Western Pond Turtle (*Clemmys marmorata*), once a common and widely distributed species in Washington State, is now highly threatened. If you are interested in encouraging the survival of this species, a good place to start is by exploring the Western Pond Turtle Project Web site at www.pondturtle.com/ptproj.html.

Bring in the A(mphibian) Team

For gardeners who want to attract frogs, toads and other amphibian friends, here are some tips. Most of these creatures breed in ponds without fish (they eat the tadpoles), or in temporary pools. The temporary pools and swamps we see in spring and early summer may not seem important, but many amphibians use them as breeding sites. Encourage success by piling a little brush around the edges; this offers great hiding spots for young frogs and toads. If you can place some dead branches in the water, females will use these to attach egg masses. Allowing a diverse native plant community (including “weeds”) to grow around natural ponds and swampy areas can encourage amphibian wildlife. Limit the use of pesticides and insecticides, including slug bait. These eliminate food sources and have toxic impacts to eggs, tadpoles, frogs and toads.

A fun family evening project for spring and summer is listening to see if you can identify frogs and toads by their trills, grunts, kreek- eecks and croaks. Listen to sounds at wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/region1/herps/htm#sounds.



In the photo on the left Thayer Cueter of Edmonds-based Just Frogs Toads Too! smiles beneath the scramble of Kermit, a Pacific Treefrog, during a recent presentation for the Edmonds Backyard Wildlife Habitat Project. In the photo on the right she holds Golden-Eye, a one-eyed American Bullfrog she rehabilitated. Thayer rehabilitates many frogs and amphibians and works with zoos worldwide. Photos by Alan Mearns.