

Notable Natives

American Toad

An American toad *Bufo americanus* is a gardener's delight. One toad can consume thousands of pests (such as cutworms and slugs) in a summer. Toads are fun to watch as they hop around and hide under logs or leaves. If you provide shallow water like a birdbath on the ground, you might see a toad return daily to soak in it.



At this time of year, toads are hibernating deep underground. In spring, they will migrate toward water, typically each toad returning to the same pond edge or shallow stream where it was spawned. You can hear the two-to-three inch-long male calling for a mate with a long, high trill lasting up to thirty seconds. Females, about four inches long, will lay thousands of eggs in long, jelly-covered strings at the water's edge. The jelly feeds the tadpoles for about a week, until they emerge and attach to underwater vegetation. Eventually, they begin

wiggling their tails to swim, moving in large schools, foraging for algae, insects, or carrion. Metamorphosis – from tadpole to toad – takes about six weeks. Out of thousands of eggs laid by one female, about a dozen will survive to maturity.

The cricket-sized toadlets move to dry land. They prefer forest edges but can survive in a wide range of habitats as long as they have plenty of invertebrates to eat, a hiding place, and moist ground for burrowing. Toads are most active at night. They can live for five to ten years in the wild. Until they migrate up to one mile for breeding, they don't move from their small home area unless the land is disturbed.

Toads are an important part of the food web. Tadpoles keep excess nutrients from building up in water by consuming algae and plankton. They are themselves food for diving beetles, dragonfly naiads, and herons. Toads help keep insect populations in balance. Although the bufotoxin secreted from their skin makes toads unpalatable or deadly to many potential predators, other animals including raccoons, herons, and garter snakes will eat them. In this way toads move nutrients from water to land.

The American toad is widespread and common, but individual populations are at risk if the ephemeral ponds where they breed dry up or are paved over. Toads readily absorb chemicals through their skin and are sensitive to fertilizers and pesticides on land and in water.

You can help support toads in your yard by providing a shallow, fish-free pond for breeding from March to July; shelter (flat stones, logs, or toad houses put out early in spring); a yard free from pesticides; dense vegetation that supports an abundance of insects; careful mowing; water for toads to soak in during the summer; and leaf litter to hold moisture in the ground.

Join CFC's Habitat Corridors program to learn how your property can provide amphibian habitat and be part of a pathway that helps American toads and other animals survive habitat loss.

— Sharon Pasch