

## Plumpton Toad Patrol

If you are driving home, during the Winter, after dark along Plumpton Lane near the sandpit quarry, between January and March, you might be surprised to see a small group of people gathered at the roadside. They are decked out in hi-vis clothing and brandishing torches and buckets, undeterred by the drizzling rain. This is the Plumpton Toad Patrol, a group of intrepid volunteers who are helping toads to cross the road safely and saving thousands from death or injury every year.

### But why are they out trying to help the common toad – Latin name '*Bufo bufo*'?

The common toad is a widespread amphibian found throughout mainland Britain and on many islands. Common toads prefer deeper water bodies in which to breed. These may include farm ponds, reservoirs, fish ponds or village duck ponds. Sadly, these types of freshwater body are threatened in many parts of the UK and toads have been declining, especially in the southern half of Britain. As a result, In Britain, the common toad is protected by law only from sale and trade, but is a biodiversity priority species under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act (2006) because of recent declines. This means that the species should be considered during planning and development.

**How can they be recognised?** Males toads can grow up to 8cm and females up to about 10cm. Common toads are generally brown or olive-brown in colour, but are very variable; females are often reddish or have reddish warts. The skin is 'warty' and often appears dry. Glands in the skin contain powerful toxins and many would-be predators learn to avoid eating toads. Toxins are also present in the skin of the tadpoles.

Common toads are most active at night when they hunt invertebrates including ants, beetles, snails, slugs and spiders. If they find a good source of food, they can become sedentary. Indeed, they may often remain in gardens for long periods in the summer months. Unlike the common frog, toadspawn is laid in strings (not clumps) and toad tadpoles are black and form shoals. Toadlets can emerge from ponds in huge numbers during early summer, usually after rain.

**So, what happens at breeding time?** Toads are on the move as they return to their ancestral breeding ponds, ready to spawn. Their annual migration is one of the first signs of spring and there may be toads on roads from late January onwards, depending on the weather. They like it mild and damp, so often emerge from their winter hideaways after a spell of rain, and what starts as a trickle can turn into a surge of hundreds of toads all making their way back to the water. Some may only need to walk a few metres to reach their pond, while others will embark on a longer march of several hundred metres– which is a very long way when you've only got little legs. Toads migrate at night and they faithfully follow the same traditional routes to ancestral breeding ponds year after year. When they encounter an unexpected man-made obstacle like a road, they just keep on walking and huge numbers of toads across the UK are tragically squashed each year. They congregate at these ponds in spring, often a couple of weeks after common frogs breed. After a relatively short breeding period (often not more than a week), adult toads migrate away from ponds, being far more tolerant of dry conditions than the common frog.

The Plumpton Toad Patrol has been established to see the toads safely across Plumpton Lane from marshy ground, where they will have been hibernating, to the relative safety of the sandpit quarry.

So next time you drive along Plumpton Lane and see this sign, please do slow down – spare a thought not only for the safety of the volunteers, but also that you might be saving the lives of hundreds of toads – a UK endangered species.



If you would like to help please contact Marie Bullough by email on [mariebullough46@googlemail.com](mailto:mariebullough46@googlemail.com)

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