

TRITURUS CRISTATUS (Great crested newt): PREDATION BY BIRDS. I am fortunate enough to have a pond with a large colony of Great crested newts on my land and, over a number of years, have been able to observe the extensive predation that the colony suffers from birds (the pond is in the High Weald of Kent and lies about half a mile from the River Teise).

I have only been able to find very limited references to the fact that this predation occurs and have to assume that it has not been adequately recorded or documented in the past. My observations and identification of the prey are made easier by the fact that there are no fish in the pond other than a few large grass-eating carp and no other newts are resident. It is also clear that adult newts are not a problem for some birds despite the belief that toxicity affords some protection.

Firstly, Moorhens (*Gallinula chloropus*). It is perhaps surprising but Moorhens will catch and consume adult Crested newts. Although they spend most of their day pecking away at plants in the pond eating mainly vegetable matter they are omnivores and will also eat insects, worms and snails. As far as catching newts is concerned, Moorhens are opportunistic hunters in that, as far as I have seen, they do not actively seek them out. However, if an adult crested newt comes up for air in the path of a Moorhen, it becomes a target and, if possible, will be caught. When this happens it creates a great deal of excitement among the other Moorhens on the pond who chase the lucky bird hoping to share in the spoil; an indication that they would eat more if they could catch them. They do not appear to swallow them whole but peck them into smaller bits before eating them.

As far as I am aware it is not generally known that Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*) are also predators and more successful ones than Moorhens. They hunt the adult newts much more systematically and I have watched them patrolling the pond actively looking for the newts coming to the surface. A female Mallard I observed caught and consumed at least five fully-grown crested newts in the space of an hour. Having webbed-feet and better diving skills clearly makes the ducks more adept at catching them than the Moorhens and when the newts are caught they are swallowed whole, toxins clearly being no discouragement.

Predation by ducks and Moorhens pales into insignificance when compared with the predation

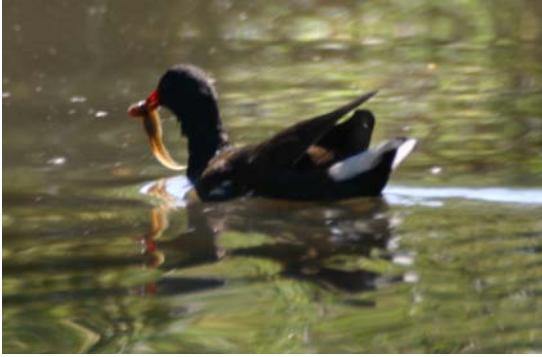


Figure 1. Moorhen having just caught an adult Great crested newt.

by Kingfishers (*Alcedo atthis*) and it is absolutely astonishing how voraciously these birds attack the colony. One is torn between the pleasure of being able to watch these spectacular birds and the devastation they are causing to the newt population.

The Kingfishers visit the pond periodically throughout the year but the serious visits start towards the end of June and carry on with great frequency through to the end of August and into September.



Figure 2. Male Mallard having just caught a Great crested newt. The head can just be seen the other side of the beak.

The timing coincides with the presence of the juvenile newts in the pond and it is these that are consumed by the Kingfishers in vast quantities. During a typical visit by a bird at least ten juveniles can be caught and consumed and these visits, particularly in the early weeks, take place throughout the day. I estimate that up to 100 juveniles can be taken from the pond on a daily basis and this attack goes on day after day.

The Kingfishers very rarely make mistakes but I have observed one young bird catching a more



Figure 3. Newt hurriedly rejected by a young kingfisher.

mature newt and dropping it like a hot potato as soon as it realised what it was. The picture (Figure 3) was taken a few seconds after this happened. This would indicate that, unlike Mallards and Moorhens, Kingfishers are not able to deal with the toxins. Despite looking completely traumatised the newt swam away when I returned it to the water.



Figure 4. Kingfisher about to consume a juvenile Great crested newt.

It is difficult to determine if the Kingfishers that visit are members of the same family. Young are certainly brought to the pond by adults and the pond seems to be the preserve of one adult male Kingfisher since I have seen rivals hide when it arrives and then be chased away. I initially thought that visits to the pond might occur when water conditions were not favourable in the nearby river but given the consistency of the visits in all weather conditions and the vast quantities consumed one has to assume that juvenile newts are part of the preferred Kingfisher diet.

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