

# Smooth newt *Lissotriton vulgaris* preyed upon by European starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

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The smooth newt *Lissotriton vulgaris* is a common European newt species growing to 11 cm, it is widespread in Great Britain (Speybroeck et al., 2016), and is well adapted to urban environments (Beebee & Griffiths, 2000). Adults breed in ponds in the springtime but both they and the metamorphs can be found in terrestrial habitats throughout the rest of the year. It is here that smooth newts may encounter a broad spectrum of terrestrial predators, including birds.

European starlings are opportunistic feeders and have developed an array of foraging techniques with a particular specialisation that involves ‘prying’ or ‘open-bill probing’, which is often used as a feeding technique in searching for invertebrate prey in grassland habitats (Cramp & Perrins, 1994; Feare, 1984). The species’ wide geographical distribution, range of habitats, and adaptability of foraging techniques, suggests a diverse diet that includes berries, seeds, and fruits, along with arthropods from the subsoil or soil surface, and even vertebrates. Animal prey is collected mainly during the breeding season and fed to nestlings but is required throughout the year (Feare & McGinnity, 1986).

On 7 May 2021 at 12:30 h during a walk along Jesus Ditch, Cambridge (52° 12’40” N, 0° 07’29” E), a female starling was observed searching for food. At first, it was seen with what was assumed to be an earthworm in its bill but on closer inspection the prey item was seen to be a female smooth newt (*Lissotriton vulgaris*; Fig. 1). The starling spent some time trying to subdue the newt before ingesting it (BHS video, 2022).

European starlings have previously been reported to prey on amphibians, such as newts (Cramp & Perrins, 1994; Feare & Craif, 1999). However, the current observation provides the first definitive evidence of *S. vulgaris* preying upon *L. vulgaris*. There is also a record of the closely related spotless starling *S. unicolor* preying on western spadefoot toad *Pelobates cultripes* in south-western Europe (Martín & López, 1990).

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**Figure 1.** A female European starling *Sturnus vulgaris* feeding on a female smooth newt *Lissotriton vulgaris* in Cambridge, England

BHS video (2022). Predation of a smooth newt (*Lissotriton vulgaris*) by a starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*). <https://youtu.be/oA7i4zVRukQ>.

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