

RESCUING GREAT CRESTED NEWTS A REPORT FROM THE BATTLEFIELD

WILLIAM ATKINS

10 Holmesdale Road, London N6 5TQ

INTRODUCTION

The great crested newt (*Triturus cristatus*) or 'GCN' to its friends, is the largest and most spectacular of the British species of newt. It is also the rarest, having been largely unable to offset losses through the destruction of rural ponds by colonising garden ponds (unlike the common frog and smooth newt, for example). In particular, it requires fish-free ponds because the larvae, which swim in open water, are easy prey to them. Also they require relatively larger sized ponds than the average garden pond because of their larger size. Although not as localised as the natterjack toad, it was given full protection under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) and more recently under the Bern Convention and EC Habitats and Species Directive, making it the most highly protected British 'herp'! This was largely due to the international significance of British colonies and the sharp decline in its numbers since the second world war.

The following report is an account of a major GCN rescue which took place in the northernmost borough of London, Enfield, in the spring of 1994. During the lengthy process of saving the newts from imminent destruction we encountered all sorts of legal and diplomatic problems and this account may be of interest and help to anyone involved in the worthwhile occupation of conserving populations of our native herpetofauna.

THE EARLY STAGES

I was first made aware of the threatened colony of GCN by Clive Herbert, the herpetological representative of the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust. The Trust, in turn has been alerted by the developers who reported that a local resident had said that a pond they were about to destroy on land designated for new housing contained GCN. The Wildlife and Countryside Act gives protection to the 'sheltering places' of species like the GCN, and in this case such a place is taken to include the breeding site, ie the pond. This is where the first legal problem arises - the important loophole that protection cannot be granted of a site retrospectively, ie after the planning enquiry and after planning permission has been granted. Sadly in this case the resident hadn't got his act together soon enough - a year earlier and the whole development might have been stopped. It also removed any legal responsibility from the developers to protect the pond and its newts.

A phone call to the developers ensured that we could visit the site after dark, the best time to observe the secretive GCN. As we trod across the rest of the site, consisting of banks of earth and rubble and compacted clay, it was obvious that the terrestrial habitat for the newts had been effectively destroyed and consequently even if the pond at this late hour could be saved there would be little point as the adjacent habitat for the newts is just as important. The pond itself had been partly bulldozed and was about half its original width, now 6m by 17m long, but since the GCN alert the workmen had been careful not to destroy any more of it. The water was

very turbid, a mixture of clay particles and an algal bloom reducing visibility even with a strong torch beam to a few inches. Eventually, though, a random sweep of the net produced a small female GCN. This raises another problem – it is illegal under the letter of the law to handle a GCN – a possible fine of £5,000 per newt awaits you if you dare! It is necessary to apply for a licence from English Nature, (the body which oversees conservation law in Britain) in order to avoid the potential embarrassment and worse of being charged with illicit newt-handling. If there is simply no time to wait English Nature may grant a licence after you have actually done the work, but as it stands the law means you have to take a risk if, for example, you lift a GCN from the road to avoid it being crushed by a juggernaut. To their credit English Nature worked fast to provide Clive Herbert with a licence as he did not already have one.

After that first night we had ammunition viz a single GCN. Now since the mention of the newt can bring on palpitations in the most hardened of developers, they could have gone ahead with the original plan which was to fill in the pond on the day after our visit. It is to their credit that they gave a stay of execution to the pond of a month whilst we tried to fish out as many of the newts as possible.

So the idea was simple – visit the pond as often as possible and fish out the newts. But there were further difficulties. One of the most amusing was the arrival of the police, tipped off by a zealous resident who presumably thought we were thieves stealing building materials from the site. When they discovered several people standing waist deep in a pond with torches and nets they were relieved and somewhat amused themselves. Also making a nocturnal appearance at the pondside was a species which will defend its habitat vigorously, *Enfieldus nimbyensis* – “Not-in-my-backyard man”. The residents, not surprisingly irate at the prospect of a large private garden suddenly being transformed into a series of houses commanding excellent views of the existing houses’ bedrooms, had stopped at nothing to stop the building, but with little success. They had clubbed together to get legal backing and tried pulling strings in golf clubs and one or two less traditional things as well, and now, finding people like us telling them the GCN were highly protected, they assumed we would be ‘on their side’. And so here was another problem. For once the conservationists (us) weren’t on the side of the NIMBY’S (also ‘us’) but were removing the newts, their last hope, so that the developers (them) could develop. This made us look like them, if you see what I mean. All I could say was that if they had told us about the newts at the planning enquiry stage then it could have been a different story, but our first priority were the newts, and since their habitat was no longer protected and indeed had mostly been destroyed we had to get them away from the area.

During all of this nocturnal discussion, we did manage to catch some newts and in fact it became clear that we were dealing with a quantity of newts which was very significant indeed, at least in Greater London terms. We caught over 100 animals (which reaches the threshold for SSSI status) and there was no real sign that the numbers were diminishing. In addition it was evident that there were several hundred of the smaller and commoner smooth newts in the pond and some frogs left in the pond after they had spawned. Plan B was therefore necessary. . . .

Plan B: Plan B involved the complete draining of the pond by day, giving us the opportunity to fish out the newts as they became visible. Straightforward? Not quite. For a start we had to complete the operation within a day or the newts would abandon the pond at night if it had lost half of its depth. We then had to arrange for the



Plate 1. – One of the 200 GCN rescued from the doomed pond in Enfield – a typically marked male with the high crest during the breeding season.

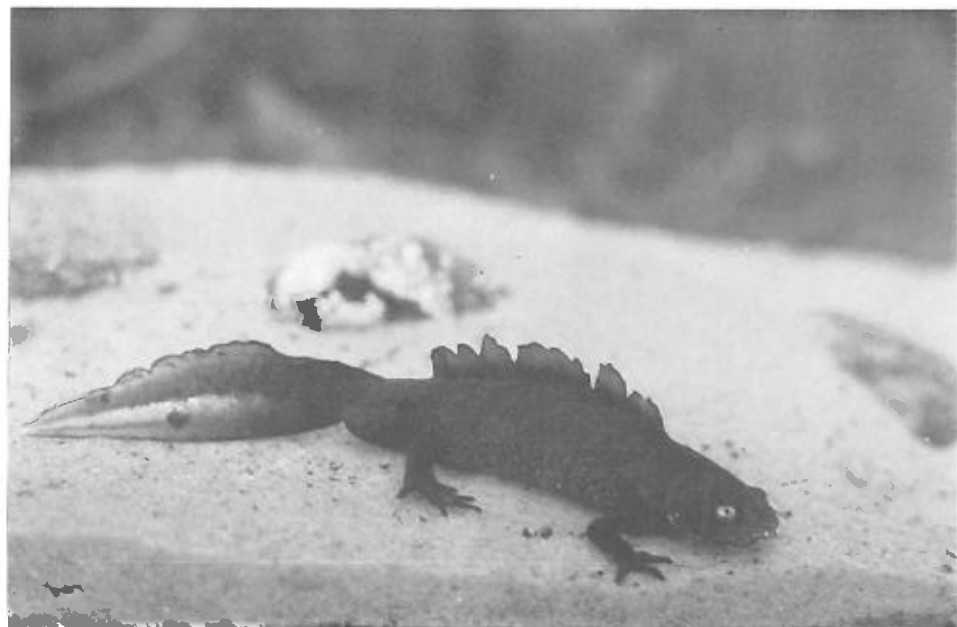


Plate 2. – An unusual partially melanistic male GCN clearly very different from the others in the pond. Note the reduced crest and grey/black colour. Its belly was almost entirely black.



Plate 3. - Midway through the pond drainage, a few days later the same area was buried under concrete and brick, but hopefully all the newts had been safely translocated.

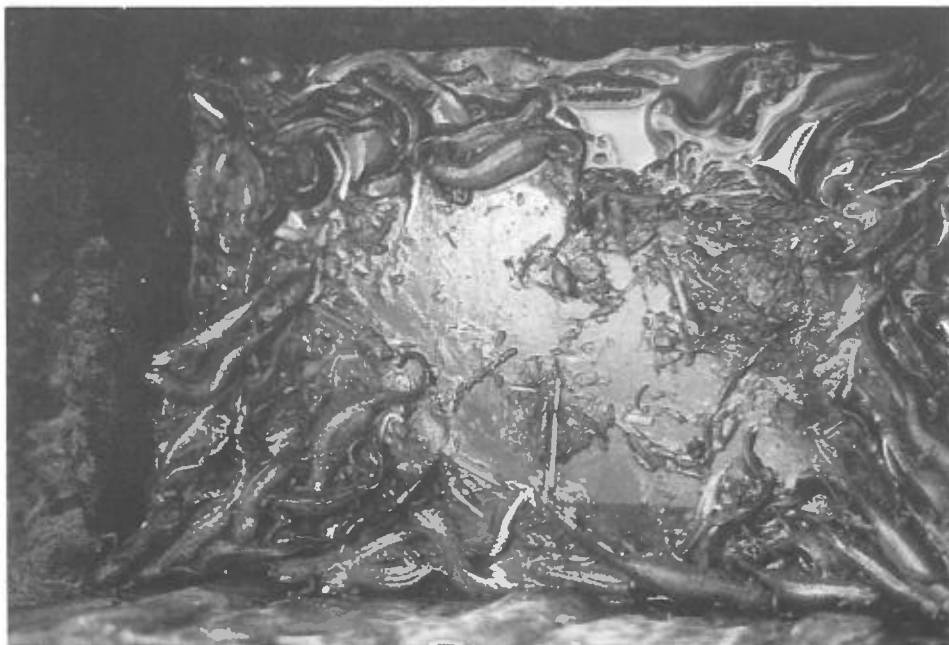


Plate 4. - A bucketful of newts, several dozen adult GCN about to be relocated to a suitable newt pond several miles from their old home.

builders to supply a suction pump which would work quickly enough to remove the water but not to remove or mince the newts. We also needed to arrange for volunteers to remove assorted denizens of the pond such as smooth newts and common frogs, and finally we had to contend with the treacherous quickmud which remained as the water drained from the pond.

We arrived at the site on a sunny morning just after nine o'clock – a motley band of members and friends of the local wildlife trust, some perhaps better prepared than others for the rigours of the day – Yours truly, for example, had brought no drink or food and by late afternoon sorely wished he had. The first problem was the pump – very efficient but at the front was a nozzle with a metal rose just large enough to mangle GCNs. Experiments with fine mesh in front failed (the pump wouldn't work) and so we were reduced to putting fingers in front of the rose in order to grab newts as they got sucked towards it (any loss of fingers, not being scheduled species was deemed permissible). In the end only 1 newt was mangled largely due to the heroic work of one of our volunteers. The second problem was the impossibility of working on the banks or floor of the pond directly, that is without snowshoes or somesuch to spread our weight, and so an elaborate network of planks was spread into the pond as the level of water went down. From this we plucked newts heron-like from the water and put them in plastic picnic hampers bought from a petrol station, which proved ideal newt carriers. We worked through the day, being assisted by helpful brickies who quickly became adept newtters (encouraged by our female volunteers) and interrupted by the local press and residents. The latter philosophically wished us and the newts the best of luck as the newt home was transformed into new homes.

At the end of the day we had accumulated another 100 GCN and over 800 smooth newts as well as 60 frogs. The total number of rare GCN was therefore 200 from a relatively small pond. It just goes to show what an incredible biomass of amphibians can be supported within a small area, particularly in the breeding pond, provided fish and so on are excluded.

The final thing to do was to release the newts in their new homes. In the interests of this protected species I won't divulge their precise locations, except to say that they are all reasonably close to their old home. In fact another problem with translocations such as this is finding a suitable pond – it must be fairly close to the original one, be suitable for GCN (including the terrestrial habitat) but not have an existing colony (for reasons of possible overcrowding and the current conservation vogue of maintaining genetic integrity even of frogspawn). We chose ponds which had recently been created in nature reserves in the main, and to avoid putting our eggs in one basket several different reserves were chosen. We will monitor the fate of the colonists, but there's every reason to suppose that they should do well in areas which are hopefully protected from development.

CONCLUSIONS

Although there was nothing we or the law could do to save the original pond, I think there are reasons to be pleased with the outcome of this rescue. For a start, the developers in this case were clearly not the ogres that they often can be (even if the motives were to do with good publicity, it's the newts that we're concerned with). Secondly English Nature were quick in their licensing and approval of release sites for the newts, as were the borough conservation officers who had to be consulted

before we released the newts into their territory. Finally the future of the animals themselves is a bright one, and the sheer numbers caught in this pond may inspire pond owners to go for all-out productivity in their own ponds. By now the human residents will have moved into the site with no knowledge of the conservation battle to rescue the newts that took place in their living rooms just a couple of months ago.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the volunteers who helped with the rescue, in particular Clive Herbert who liased with the developers so diplomatically. I would also like to thank Jan Clemons, Chair of the BHS Conservation Committee for her advice.