

Frogs and toads in Richmond Park

by Nigel Jackman

Richmond Park is home to two amphibians that are not regularly seen, belying their names: the common frog and the common toad.

Frogs are clearly distinguishable from toads. Their bulging eyes are on top of their heads, their skin is smooth and sometimes shiny (to help them move through water) and their hind legs are long and strong with webbed feet to help them with jumping. By contrast, toads have dry, bumpy and warty skin, and a squatter appearance with a shorter body and legs.

Each in its own way is adapted for the environmental conditions in which it lives. Unlike frogs, toads prefer a dry environment except for breeding and do not need to live in or near water to survive.



Frogs and toads are omnivorous, each feeding on insects, worms, small fish and other aquatic creatures. Toads love snails and slugs. Both have an average lifespan of seven to 14 years, but some individuals can reach 40. Both species hibernate over the winter before emerging to breed from February/March onwards.

Frogs lay their eggs in water in clusters whereas toads lay theirs in chains.

Tadpoles hatch with tails and internal gills two to four weeks later and by 12 to 16 weeks will have metamorphosed into adults and left the pond, usually after rain. Many juveniles will be predated during this time. Mature frogs and toads are prey to herons, buzzards, foxes and other species.



Toads single-mindedly migrate to ancestral ponds as the days lengthen and temperatures rise, and this is when they are most likely to be seen, at dawn and dusk. They are at great risk where their migration routes cross roads. Church Road in Ham has sometimes been temporarily closed and monitored by volunteers as toads make their way from the Park and surrounding areas to breed in Ham Common Woods.

Whilst frogs and toads are an important part of the Park's ecology, there have been no comprehensive surveys to find

Photos by Nigel Jackman. Left: common toad; above: common frog

out their numbers, population trends and distribution. Nationally both species have declined significantly, and numbers in the Park have been adversely affected by disease, including the deadly chytrid virus and probably also by rana virus.

Improvements to the Park's ponds and streams has been beneficial to amphibians. However, the linkage between ponds and other watery features is also important as frogs and toads spend a lot of time living and feeding in terrestrial habitats, sheltering under stones and wood piles.

The Royal Parks are looking to make further improvements, working with partners such as the national wildlife charity Froglife.

Rhododendron clearance

By Hugh Bradshaw

Winter is a good time to see how efforts to eradicate *Rhododendron Ponticum* in the Park are progressing. It has now been completely removed from Sidmouth Wood, will soon be cleared from Spankers Hill and the trusty band of conservation volunteers have made commendable inroads at Pen Ponds Plantation.

Although some may mourn the loss of the dazzling display of purple flowers, *Rhododendron Ponticum* is an invasive species whose dense canopies shade out native flora. Insects avoid the plants so, where it grows in large patches, a sterile monoculture arises. If this were not bad enough, *Rhododendron Ponticum* can carry diseases that are a death knell to our mighty oak.

Once the rhododendron has been cleared, the ground is exposed to sunlight – perhaps for the first time in years – and very quickly bramble and silver birch move in. These pioneer species are well adapted to exploit new environments and start the process of natural regeneration.

The bramble is found on the periphery of the plantations and its ability to propagate by suckers, and its prodigious growth rate, enable it to swiftly colonise new areas. The tiny seeds of the silver birch can fall in vast numbers on the bare ground and quickly germinate to form a forest of saplings.

Removing the rhododendron stumps disturbs the ground and awakens long dormant seeds of foxgloves and other wild flowers.

As the birch saplings grow they, in turn, shade out the bramble, allowing other species of flora to colonise, like bluebells and campion. In amongst the birches, oak and sweet chestnut, saplings can take hold. Unlike the birch trees, which rarely live past 80 years, the oak and sweet chestnut are there for the duration. Eventually they take over from the birch and the regeneration of the woodland is complete.