



*Article and Photo by Margie Manthey and published in the Westport Review Mirror, 2020*



**The nocturnal American toad has a stout, grumpy appearance.**

It measures 2-4" long, with the female being a bit larger than the male. It has rough skin in shades of brown, red or olive, with darker blotches containing raised "warts" of varying colors. Its belly is white with black spots. This toad occupies many different types of habitats, including forests, meadows, backyards, gardens and agricultural land and is highly adaptive to its surroundings. Using its slightly webbed back feet, it digs depressions in the soil during inactive daylight hours and deeper burrows for hibernation. Its thick skin

helps prevent dehydration, so it can live in places too dry for most other amphibians. The toad does not drink water; rather, it absorbs it through a "seat patch," an area of skin located on the lower abdomen.

Indeed, the American toad is well adapted for life as a land lubber, but it requires a water source for reproduction. During a short breeding season each spring, it congregates in shallow ponds and streams, along river edges and in wet ditches. The male toad establishes a territory and begins to attract females using a monotone trill lasting up to 30 seconds. The first note of the call is slightly lower than the rest, giving it a melancholy sound. The female toad chooses her mate based on the impressiveness of his trill and territory. During mating, the female lays thousands of eggs. The long, gelatinous ribbons of fertilized eggs wrap around aquatic vegetation and other submerged objects. They hatch quickly, sometimes within just a few days, depending on water temperature. Warmer water promotes a quicker hatch. The newly emerged tadpoles have gills to breathe underwater. They are very dark -- almost black -- and swim around together, feeding on algae and plant matter. As they develop, their hind legs form first; then the front legs emerge. Around the same time, the gills disappear, and the tails are reabsorbed. Finally, the tiny toadlets are ready to leave the water for life on land. The complete metamorphosis takes between 40-70 days. As growth continues, they will shed their external skin every 2 weeks or so. In contrast, an adult toad only sheds 3-4 times a year. The skin peels off in one piece and is consumed by the toad. Reproductive maturity is reached around 2-3 years.

The American toad employs binocular, 3-D vision and a lightning-fast, sticky, extendable tongue to catch a multitude of insects such as flies, crickets, grasshoppers, spiders, worms, snails and slugs. One toad can eat 1,000 insects in a day! In fact, most of its prey is agricultural pests, making it a true friend to farmers and gardeners alike. This species can ooze a milky toxin from glands behind its head that helps protect it from many predators. It causes the toad to taste bad and can make some animals sick. Nevertheless, the toad is eaten by raccoons, hawks and herons. Its main predators are snakes, particularly the eastern hognose snake and the garter snake, which are immune to its poisonous excretions. The American toad uses other defensive tactics, too. It often urinates on itself to discourage a predator and may also puff up with air to make itself too big to swallow. Although this species is not usually dangerous to dogs, you should rinse out your dog's mouth thoroughly if it foams after contact. A final piece of toad trivia: you cannot catch warts from touching a toad, but should wash your hands afterwards to remove secretions.

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