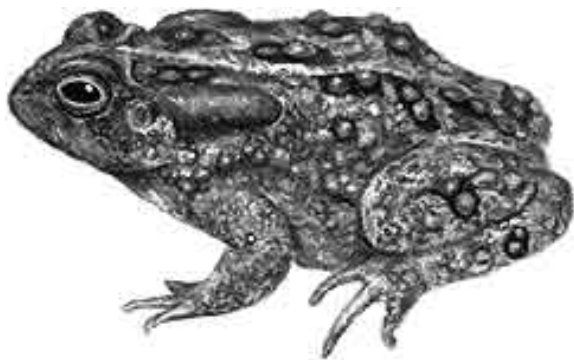


Creature Feature: Winter 2014

By W. Scott Douglas

Fowler's Toad, *Anaxyrus fowleri*



Let's face it, despite their reputation as "ugly," toads are pretty cute. They aren't slimy, don't sneak around, eat lots of bugs, and are reasonably unafraid of being watched, or even gently examined (although you might get peed on). At our Board meeting a few months ago Hans Reimann reported seeing a different kind of toad at his place in Springtown.

He said it was whiter than the usual American toad that he frequently sees out on summer nights patrolling the old campground. I knew we didn't have a lot of species, but I was intrigued and decided to look it up. Although I didn't see the creature myself, I'm guessing that it was a Fowler's Toad. The Fowler's toad is a bit smaller than the American toad, only about 2-3 inches in length. Its key feature is its completely white belly. American toads have spots on all or most of their undersides. They also have more warts on the dark spots on their backs than the American toad, but flipping the guy over and looking at its belly is easier than counting warts. The only other true toad we have is the Spadefoot toad, but it is very rare here (more common in the Susquehanna watershed).

Toads are not at all dangerous to humans. The myth that they are poisonous is based on the fact that the parotoid glands – the large wart right behind the eye – secrete a nasty tasting substance when the toad is threatened. This will not cause warts, but it will make the average fox or raccoon change its mind about eating the toad. However, herons and hawks will eat toads, when and if they can find them. Toads eat a large variety of insects and other invertebrates, but they especially like worms and slugs. Fowler's toads are particularly fond of

beetles and ants. All toads are nocturnal feeders, and tend to gather around lights at night to feast on the animals that are attracted there.

Toads breed from late spring through the summer. The male calls the female to him using a song generated by gulping air into its extremely flexible throat sac and pushing the air out its nostrils. Songs are distinctive. American toads call in a long trill that everyone has heard, but might not have known what it was. The Fowler's toad on the other hand has a short w-a-a-a-h grunt that is much harder to recognize. Like all amphibians, toads must go to water to breed. They prefer vernal pools, but will also use roadside ditches and mud puddles, as well as shallow inlets of larger, more permanent bodies of water. Like salamanders, they prefer to lay their eggs out of reach of fish and other predators. Toads lay an amazing number of eggs – up to 8,000 – in long strings. Unfortunately, the chosen puddle may dry up before the small black tadpoles are ready to metamorphose and move out. But if all goes well, hundreds of little half inch long toadlets will emerge. Toads reach maturity in 2-3 years, and will live up to 10 years in the wild. Captive toads can live up to 30 years or more.

If you wish to find toads, go out at night around your house with a flashlight. Trails down by the creek and around vernal ponds are also good spots, particularly in breeding season. It's fun to try to identify the various calling amphibians, but it can be pretty frustrating to try to find the critters as they tend to quiet down when you approach. Get into a good comfortable viewing position, stay still and wait. They are not skittish of your light, so you can feel free to shine it around and watch the males sing. The internet has a whole lot of links to audio clips to hear their songs before you go. Although you can certainly keep a toad as a pet, it's pretty easy to "keep" them outside in your garden. Many garden supply shops and catalogs have "toad houses" for sale. Place the house in a moist shady spot, with good loose soil underneath, and near a street or porch light. Chances are good that the toad you attract will be a common American toad, but if you happen to see a Fowler's, do let us know. They are a species of special concern in Pennsylvania.

Editor's note: You may want to review the "Children's Backyard" page of the Spring 2011 edition of the *Cooks Current* for more information on creating your own toad house.