

Our only backyard salamander

By Jim Anderson
Correspondent

It's always a pleasure for me to come out the back (or front), step of the porch and suddenly see a long, slender amphibian with a bright yellow patch on its back madly scrambling for cover under the porch.

If that happened to you some stormy night after a rain, don't be surprised, it's "our" long-toed salamander, the only native salamander we have running around on this side of the Cascades. According to local herp expert Al St. John, it's known as *Ambystoma macrodactylum*.

According to paleontologists, they originated approximately 81 million years ago, in the late Cretaceous.

The body of the long-toed salamander is usually dusky dark with a dorsal stripe of dusky tan, yellow, or olive-green, which at times can be seen as broken up into a series of spots. The sides of the body can have tiny fine white or pale blue flecks. There is no other salamander in the Northwest that looks

like that.

The long-toed can be found throughout the Northwest, almost as far north as Alaska. It lives at altitudes from 2,400 feet to a little over 9,000 feet above sea level. You can find them in the sagebrush and juniper clear up to the summit of Mt. Bachelor scurrying about in damp underbrush.

Amphibians and salamanders hibernate in winter, surviving on moisture and absorbing oxygen through their skin in the hibernaculum, which is located in damp soil well below the freeze line. It cannot move to feed while hibernating, so it keeps alive by living off the fat reserve under the skin and in the tail. That may not sound like fun, unless you like to sleep and not move around during winter.

Surprisingly, long-toeds are active when there's still frost in the night air; one can find their eggs in water under a thin skim of ice on small ponds. Like many amphibians, the eggs are surrounded by a transparent, gelatinous capsule, making the embryo visible during development.

When in its egg, the long-toed embryo is darker on top and whiter below. Prior to hatching the larvae have "balancers" — thin skin protrusions sticking out the sides and supporting the head. The balancers eventually fall off and their external gills appear. Long-toed salamanders are predators in the larval form, and as they become adults, the head grows longer (to catch larger prey, it would seem). Then their limbs appear — four digits on the front limbs and five on the rear — and when lungs are developed, the gills are resorbed into the animal's tissue bank.

As long-toed larvae metamorphose, the developing digits distinguish this species from others and is also the etymological origin of its specific genus: *macrodactylum*.

They are also known as the mole salamanders for the way they dig into the soil to escape predators, find food (worms and larval insects), and stay cool and damp.

As a Citizen Scientist your observations could be vital to the herpetile scientific



PHOTO BY TOM DAVIS

Long-toed adult salamander.

community (the study of amphibians and reptiles). Reproductive habitat, such as ponds and small slow streams with larva could be brought to the attention of local wildlife officials. If you bump into an

adult long-toed while you're gardening or conducting other outdoor activities, that too is important information.

Send information to Jim Anderson, jimnaturalist@gmail.com.

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