



Tales from a
Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

Amphibians to watch out for

If you should come out on your back porch some day — or night — next summer and see the beautiful adult long-toed salamander, please be kind to it; it's the ONLY "native" salamander you will find in Sisters Country.

We do also have the rough-skinned newt, but it hangs out most of the time near our lakes further up the slopes of the Cascades. If you find yourself kayaking placid waters near Warm Springs, you should see rough-skinned newts there as well.

There's a similarity between the long-toed salamander and the rough-skinned newt you've gotta' watch out for — a very dangerous neurological poison in the newt and perhaps in the long-toed salamander as well.

I can not shout loud enough about the toxins in the newt's skin. *Stay away from it!* It can kill you!

There's an old story I heard back in the 1950s about three trappers who were spending the winter at Snow Creek — up near Elk and Lava Lakes — who were found dead in their cabin in the spring.

At first foul play was thought to have been the cause, but while investigating, a state police trooper found the skeleton of a rough-skinned newt in the trappers' coffee pot, which may have told the true story of the poor trappers' death.

It was thought one of the men scooped some water from the creek for coffee and unknowingly captured a newt while doing so; he boiled it up with the coffee and that was that.

Through the non-breeding season, newts and salamanders are terrestrial, living in the forest near their breeding sites, eating arthropods and such. They protect themselves from predators by depending on that powerful toxin in their skin. When a skunk, badger, weasel or even an owl tries to capture the newt it goes into a defense posture which causes it to become rigid and showing its potent skin.

If you must pick one up to feel the animal's dry, rough skin, please — after you have released it back into the wild — find a place where you won't contaminate the habitat and wash your hands at least twice with soap and water. If you should injure your finger before washing your hands, *don't suck your finger to relieve the pain*; you'll probably get more than you bargained for.

The fourth toe on the hind leg of the salamander is longer than the others and yes, that's how the animal got its name. The front legs show the long toe even better, but it looks like Tom's specimen in the photo was of a mind to go down the crack in the porch planking, and hid its front feet.

The distribution of this salamander is primarily in the Pacific Northwest, and Oregon particularly. Unlike some — or should I say, most — of Oregon's salamanders, this one can make a living just about anywhere, even out in the dry sagebrush country. If there's an arthropod that will fit in its mouth, it's prey.

Like all of its kin, it uses small ponds, lakes and even slow-moving streams in which to lay its eggs. One of the things I find astounding about the long-toed is the temperature minimums for water in which to lay its eggs. I have found eggs under the frozen surface of ponds up on the slopes of Green Ridge, with no snow on the ground. When it's time to breed, it's time to breed, no matter the weather. And as soon as the eggs hatch, the larvae immediately start eating anything and everything they can get into their mouths. These little guys are carnivores as larvae and eat larger arthropods as adults.

Speaking of breeding: If you happen to be standing in the right place at the right time some spring day or night you may witness their courting dance. Like other ambystomatid salamanders, they have evolved a characteristic where they rub bodies and release pheromones from their chin glands prior to assuming a copulatory mating position.

Once in position, the male deposits a spermatophore — a gooey stalk tipped with



PHOTO BY TOM DAVIS

Our local adult long-toed salamander.

a packet of sperm — and walks the female forward to be inseminated. Males may mate more than once and may deposit as many as 15 spermatophores over the course of a five-hour period.

Now that we're getting so personal, let's talk about their skin as well. Yep, you guessed it, like the newt, the salamander also possess a toxin that, from all guesses, is pretty bad stuff.

While hibernating the animal survives on protein energy stored under the skin of its tail. However, the protein has a secondary

purpose, and that's to act like a defense. When danger threatens, the salamander waves its tail and secretes a white, sticky, milky substance that is noxious.

If you should pick up a long-toed salamander and notice a sudden accumulation of white, sticky substance around its tail getting on your hands, give the animal your apologies, and put it down in a safe spot. Then shoot some photos of your hands and the animal's tail, and wash your hands, at least twice. Then, please send me copies of the photos: jim.naturalist@gmail.com.

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