



London
Wetland Centre

Pond life, Amphibians, and reptiles

WWT

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Helping others to learn about pond life

You don't need to be an expert in order to interact with families and help them to look at pond life more carefully. The best things to do, if you're not sure what a creature is, is to focus on what you can observe and make connections with creatures you are familiar with.

Try getting families to look at the following characteristics of the animals in the trays. Then get help them think about how the characteristics help the animals live in the pond.

Physical features

What else does it look like?

Think about other animals the creature looks like. Chances are you aren't going to be too far off the mark, after all much of taxonomy was based on physical characteristics that could be seen just with a magnifying glass. It also gives you a starting point for thinking about how that creature lives. If it looks like a wood louse, chances are it lives in a similar way to a wood louse.

Colours and colouration

Another easy characteristic to see, most pond creatures are dark browns or black, this affords creatures some protection from camouflage, blending in with the mud. More difficult to spot are creatures which are mostly clear or translucent (phantom midge larvae, fish lice, freshwater shrimp). Many of these live in the water column, blending in wherever they are because they're clear.

There are a few brightly coloured or noticeable creatures in the pond. Bright red bloodworms are the most likely to be found. Their colour comes from haemoglobin, the same pigment we have in our blood. It is a very efficient carrier of oxygen and allows them to survive in polluted or oxygen poor bodies of water; places where the water is likely to be murky or where most predators cannot survive. In these situations their bright colouration isn't going to get it eaten.

Fish and water boatmen are a different colour on top and underneath. This counter shading is different form of camouflage. The light belly of the fish and shiny wing case of the water boatman help them to blend in with the reflective surface of the pond as seen from below. The dark upper half of the fish and dark underside of the boatman help them to blend in with the darker bottom of the pond when seen from above.

How many legs does it have?

These can be an easy clue to help narrow down what an animal is. Legs also give clues about how that animal lives, look at the shape of the legs and how the animal uses those legs in the trays and think about what that means for living in a pond.

No legs - worms, snails, larvae, pupae

These can float or drift in the water column, these need still or very slow moving water, in flowing water these creatures are quickly swept away. Others will have to slide around the bottom. The bottom of a pond

generally has the least oxygen of all areas. Bottom dwellers are often pretty tolerant of polluted water where oxygen levels are low.

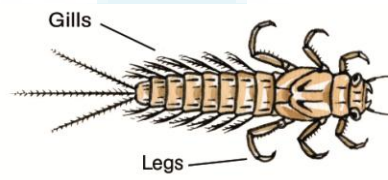
6 legs - insects; 8 legs - spiders; 10 or more - crustaceans

Long or thin legs walk along the bottom or among dense plants.

Wide or hairy legs produce good propulsion for swimming.

Gills or no gills

Not all things that stick out from an animal's body are legs. Look for feathery appendages. These are most likely gills, which extract oxygen from the water. These are feathery to increase surface area for more effective oxygen exchange.



Behaviours

Fast or slow?

Fast animals are often adapted for hunting down their food. Many of these will lie in wait then dart after a tasty morsel as it swims by. Look for big eyes, hooked front legs, big jaws, or pointed sucking mouthparts, all of which help predators catch and consume their food.

Others animals will be fast as an escape mechanism. Look for smaller eyes or undirected fast movements like the twitches of many fly larvae.

Slow animals often will eat algae, plants, or dead and decaying matter which has drifted down to the bottom of the pond. Look for small eyes which can detect the movement of predators, but aren't so great for tracking prey. Look for long antenna/tentacles, these 'smell' changes in water chemistry which can help them find food.

Hiding

Watch for where and how animals hide. Some will hide to evade predators. Others are predators themselves and hide to surprise their prey.

Hiding predators: again look for big eyes for tracking prey, hooked front limbs for grabbing, big jaws or sucking mouthparts for eating food with hard exoskeletons.

Some creatures like the water boatmen will instinctively hide underneath floating leaves to avoid being spotted by passing birds.

Hanging out at the surface

Pond creatures hanging out at the surface are generally there because they need to breathe air, and most of these will be insects or larva. These are still largely aquatic animals though and so will have adaptations to help them get air while still being in the water. Look out for snorkel tubes (water scorpion, water stick insect, mosquito larvae), bubbles carried on the body (diving beetle, water boatman).

Snails floating at the surface will probably be feeding on algae growing at the surface of the pond.

The widely spaced legs of the pond skater helps distribute its weight and allow it to skate across the surface of the pond. They feel the vibrations cause by small insects falling onto the surface of the pond and quickly dart over to eat them.

Etiquette & rules

When pond dipping it is important to minimise damage to the habitat and to ensure the wellbeing of both the pond life and the people. Always brief pond dipping participants to follow some basic rules:

- **Put animals straight into the nearest tray without using fingers!**
 - Keeping animals out of the water for too long suffocates them
 - Moving animals between ponds disturbs the ecological balance of each pond
 - Picking animals up with fingers can harm/kill them
- **Leave the mud at the bottom of the pond!**
 - Stirring/scooping up mud disturbs the habitat and makes the water in the trays very murky which means the animals can't be seen
- **Keep hands out of mouths, noses and eyes and wash hands after pond dipping!**
 - All water bodies can contain germs which can cause infections.
 - Standing water may harbour zoonotic pathogens which can cause infections, for example Weil's disease.

Tips:

- **Look for animals near vegetation.**
 - Few animals stay in open water for long, particularly when the water becomes disturbed.
 - Most wetland plants are very tough and will not have lasting damage done to them by pond dipping.
- **Empty nets in tray after each dip.**
 - Many pond creatures are easily missed in nets. It is more productive, and better for wildlife, to empty nets into trays and look for animals there.

Pond life: The Usual Suspects

FLYING INSECT larvae

Alderfly (family: Sialidae)

- Eggs laid on overhanging plants
- Hatched larvae drop into water
- Larval stage lasts 1-2 years
- Larvae are predatory with powerful jaws, gill filaments along abdomen, up to 25mm in length
- Pupate in moist ground on edge of water for 2-3 weeks, when they emerge as adults
- Adult lifespan 2-3 days, black-bodied fly, 10-15mm long. Adults often found May-June



Caddisfly (Order Trichoptera, at least 230 species in northern Europe)

- Eggs laid directly in water, though some species may lay their eggs by edge
- Eggs hatch after 2-3 weeks
- Typical life-cycle of 1-year, most of which is spent as larvae, 10-18mm in length
- Adults emerge from water and live for 1-2 weeks, weak mouthparts mean that adult caddisflies rarely eat
- As larvae, eat algae, detritus and some small animals
- Two types of larvae, those that produce a case out of sand, gravel, shells, small sticks and leaves with a silk lining, and those that are caseless. Cases are often the best way to identify species
- Adults typically seen May-September, though emergence is species specific



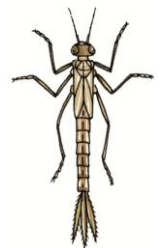
Mayfly (Order Ephemeroptera)

- Eggs laid on surface of water
- Live in water as nymphs for 2-3 years, growing to around 8mm in length, though some species grow longer
- Feathery gill filaments along back and side of abdomen, which nymphs flick rapidly so that more water flows over the body supplying oxygen as a result. Not tolerant of polluted water
- Emerge as a *dun*, and can be seen floating on the surface of the water
- Skin is then shed to become sexually mature *spinners*, and can be seen in mating swarms
- Mate, lay eggs and die, usually only living for 24 hours
- As adults they do not eat, however as larvae, plants and algae form the diet
- Adults can be seen from May-October, though emergence is species specific, usually during a 2-3 month period



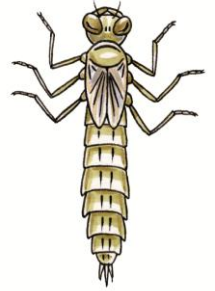
Damselfly (Order Odonata, suborder Zygoptera)

- Eggs laid in plant tissue above and below surface of water. Male will stand guard as eggs are laid
- Predatory larvae will eat a range of insect prey, particularly mayfly and midge larvae where available
- Larval stage last 2-3 years
- As adults live for around 2 weeks, typically seen May-September
- *ID hint: can often be confused with mayfly nymphs as both have 3-pronged tails. Damselfly nymphs move through the water by flexing their abdomens from side-to-side, are generally larger than mayfly nymphs, and eyes are clearly set either side of the head*



Dragonfly (Order Odonata, suborder Anisoptera)

- Around 40 species in UK
- *Darters* lay eggs on water surface in flight, fly randomly, often alighting on vegetation
- *Hawkers* lay eggs individually in plants or on banks, seen flying back and forth in straight lines
- Eggs typically take 4-5 weeks to hatch, and hatchlings may eat their siblings as they emerge
- As young larvae or *nymphs*, will eat daphnia, but diet changes as the nymph grows and may include tadpoles for larger nymphs
- Will remain as nymphs for 2-3 years. Emperor nymphs can grow in excess of 50mm
- Breathing tubes near base of gut. Draws in water through the anus and ventilates tubes this way. Can quickly expel this water to propel it through the water
- Dragonflies do not pupate. During final instar (nymphal stages of shedding exoskeleton), nymph stops eating and climbs emergent vegetation at night. Flies off as adult, usually before dawn
- Some larger species of adult dragon fly can fly between 20-35mph



CRUSTACEANS

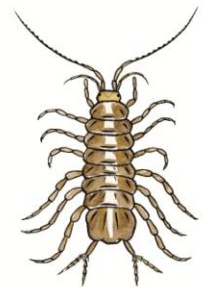
Freshwater shrimp (*Gammarus pulex*)

- Detritivore, filtering water for food particles
- Laterally flattened, swims on its side
- Intolerant of poorly oxygenated water bodies, preferring fast flowing water and often found by the inflows and outflows of stream-fed lakes
- Good food source for fish, ducks and larger aquatic insects
- Males larger than females, can grow up to 20mm long - the lake shrimp which is found in northern Britain can grow up to 25mm
- *Pond-dippers tip: often found on or around the base of rooted submerged plants*



Water hoglouse (*Asellus aquaticus*)

- Also known as *water slater*, this detritivore, an aquatic relative of the woodlouse. Bottom dwellers, living in decaying matter, and able to survive in poorly oxygenated water bodies
- Length up to 15mm, though typically 10mm long, 6 pairs of legs, 2 sets of antennae – 1st set of antennae short, 2nd set often as long as the body
- Feed on decaying matter, both animal and vegetable matter
- Females larger, often seen with white clusters of eggs in the spring
- Gills at tip of abdomen. When feeding, buries head in decaying matter leaving the gills protruding



WATER BUGS (Order Hemiptera)

Greater water boatman (Family: Notonectidae)

- Subsurface bug, also known as *backswimmer*
- Mate Dec-May, eggs laid in plant stems Feb-May
- Body up to 16mm, has 6 legs, with shorter forelegs for grabbing prey and longer hairy hind legs which it uses like oars
- Nymphs can be found in early summer. Look similar to adult but are almost white and wingless
- Diet includes tadpoles, fish and insects. Draws off prey's body fluids through a long-pointed proboscis called a stylet. Known to bite humans
- Avoids acidic or peaty water



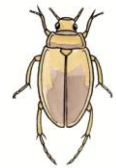
Lesser water boatman (Family: Corixidae)

- Very large diverse family
- Smaller than greater water boatman, between 5-15mm in length, and swim "right-side" up
- Trap oxygen under wings when they float to the surface
- Herbivores, unlike the greater water boatman
- Early colonisers of new ponds and are active fliers
- May also be found in brackish water or saltmarsh



DIVING BEETLES (Order Coleoptera)

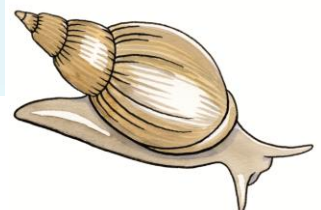
- Some of the larger species (Great diving beetle, *Dytiscus* spp.) can grow to 40mm in length, and are carnivores with a voracious appetite, eating tadpoles and fish fry
- Powerful jaws that can puncture human skin
- Generally pale brown in colour, can be seen coming to the surface, pointing tip of abdomen out of the water to collect air, which it traps under its wing cases
- Oval in shape with head set back into thorax, and tough forewings or *elytra*
- Hind legs flattened close to body, with fringes of hair to aid swimming
- May hibernate during colder winter periods
- Larvae pupate in damp soil at water's edge
- Lesser diving beetles, typically paler in colour and growing to around 4-5mm in length, although some freshwater species can grow to 14mm (these are found in mountain lakes in the north of the UK)



MOLLUSCS

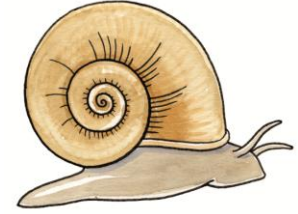
Greater pond snail (*Lymnaea stagnalis*)

- Largest of the pond snails, with brown conical shell, can grow to 50mm in length
- Feeds on algae with rasping tongue or *radula*
- Breathe air and can be seen to come to surface to replenish oxygen supply
- Lays eggs in long sausage-like strings



Ramshorn snail (*Planorbis planorbis*)

- Large snail, with shell diameter up to 18mm (the Great ramshorn, *P. Corneus*, can grow up to 35mm diameter)
- Another grazer, feeding mainly on algae that coats plants
- Tolerant of stagnant conditions, assisted by haemoglobin in the blood
- Lays eggs in clusters



Pea mussel (*Sphaerium spp.*)

- Up to finger-nail sized mollusc, up to 6mm
- Move through water with powerful, muscular foot. Climb by using strands of mucus. May disperse by attaching these threads to legs of water birds
- As a bivalve, filter feeds through two short, white siphons which are only visible when the mussel is feeding underwater
- Some pea mussel species (*Pisidium spp.*) rare in UK and endangered



LEECHES

- Widespread and common all over Europe
- Fish leeches (*Hemiclepsis marginata*) are brown to green, growing between 15-20mm in length, and are commonly found in the mouths and gills of fish, although will also feed on amphibians, attaching to armpits and groins
- Common fish leeches (*Piscicola geometra*) grow to 60mm and are an external parasite of fish
- Will also feed on molluscs and aquatic insects
- Can move quickly through water, flexing their muscular bodies. Moving across surfaces, they “loop” their way along, using the suckers at either end of the body
- During feeding, attach to host using suckers, a toothed proboscis comes forward to puncture skin and begin to drink blood. Inject an anti-coagulant to prevent blood clotting
- Can live out of water for long periods and can go without feeding for up to a year
- *Pond-dippers tip: may be undetected when first transferred to tray as usually contracted, however, after a few minutes they begin to elongate*



FISH

Three-spined stickleback (*Gasterosteus aculeatus*)

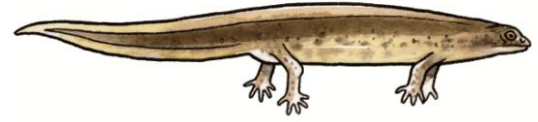
- Have 3 sharp spines in front of the dorsal fin, however, some individuals may only have 2 spines
- Grows from 5cm to 8cm long
- Feeds on small crustaceans such as daphnia
- Spines on back protect fish from being eaten by predators. Larger fish can only spit out the stickleback prey
- Breeding male has red belly to attract female and to ward off other males. Male makes nest on bottom of pond. If he attracts a female, she lays eggs in the nest and he then fertilises the eggs. Male will look after the fry until they become too large



AMPHIBIANS

Smooth newt (Lissotriton vulgaris)

- Also called Common newt, this species is the one which is most often found in garden ponds unless you live in western Scotland, west Wales or the Isle of Man
- Adults grow to between 7-11cm in length and can live for up to 6 years
- Spend most of their lives on land where they will eat worms, slugs, snails, flies and beetles. In water, aquatic invertebrates are on the menu
- Overwinter under logs or stones, moving to the water in spring to breed
- Both male and female have greenish-brown upperparts, and a pale whitish belly
- Bodies of both sexes covered in black spots, larger on the male, and by orange streaks on the belly, which are again more pronounced on the male
- During the breeding season, males develop a crest that runs along the back from head to tail, and will perform a courtship display by vibrating and slapping its tail against its side
- Between May to June, females can lay up to 300 eggs, at the rate of 3-7 eggs a day. These eggs are individually wrapped in leaves, which hatch after 10 to 20 days
- Tadpole larvae or "efts" have feathery gills, and metamorphose between July and September
- Young newts will return to breed 2-3 years later



Marsh frog (Pelophylax ridibunda)

- Largest native European frog, accidentally introduced to the UK in 1930's
- Highly variable colouration and patterning makes it difficult to distinguish from other 'green' frogs without capture
- Males can be distinguished by their visible vocal sacs
- Eggs or spawn are laid in clumps, one female can lay several thousand eggs in a season
- Tadpole larvae metamorphosis timing is highly variable, from weeks to months, or even until the following spring. Time is dependent on availability of food and on temperature
- Sexual maturity is reached in 1-4 years
- Diet is mostly insects, slugs and worms, but the marsh frog can also eat small fish and other amphibians



RESOURCES

Freshwater life: Britain and Northern Europe, Collins Pocket Guide, Malcolm Greenhalgh and Denys Ovenden

ARKive <http://www.arkive.org/>

Life in Freshwater (Field Studies Council) <http://www.lifeinfreshwater.org.uk/>

The Wildlife Trusts <http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife/species-explorer>

NBN Gateway <http://www.searchnbn.net/>

WWT pond life video <http://www.wwt.org.uk/learn/wwt-learning-resources/what-lives-in-a-pond/>

Amphibians

Handling amphibians

It is best not to handle amphibians with the public.

Amphibian skin is very thin and easily damaged, particularly while tadpoles, potentially leading to infections. As large animals which breathe through their skin they are also highly sensitive to pollution and contamination, often being some of the first species to be affected. They are most at risk from chemical residues on our hands, particularly insect repellent which can be lethal.

Frogs and toads can suffer dislocations and leg injuries when struggling is being held. Newts can suffer injury to their backs or tails when thrashing. Dropping from height can also lead to injured legs or broken bones, so if any handling is to be done it should be done while crouched down to minimize the height of a fall.

Many amphibians can also secrete toxins or irritants from their skin.

If handling an amphibian is necessary:

1. Wash hands with soap and water, rinsing hands thoroughly to get rid of as much residue as possible.
2. Rinse hands again in pond water to dilute any remaining soap or tap water additives (chlorine etc.). Handle amphibians with damp hands.
3. Crouch down
4. Frogs and toads should be held around the middle with back legs extended. Do not allow it's hips or legs to bend.
Newts should be held around the middle, between the front and back legs.
5. If you cannot get a grip on the animal, do not squeeze. Allow the animal to escape, or put it back into a container and allow it to calm before trying again.
6. Wash your hands thoroughly afterwards.

Background information

Amphibians are cold blooded animals, their body temperature is dependent on their surroundings. All amphibians lay eggs surrounded by jelly which hatch as a tadpole. The vast majority must lay their eggs in water and the larvae (tadpoles) are almost always aquatic. As they feed and mature, most will reabsorb their tails and gills, growing legs and lungs to replace them. After a few months the amphibians will emerge from the water, though it may still be an additional year before they are mature enough to breed.

Most amphibians survive winter by hibernating underneath fallen leaves, rotting vegetation, and fallen logs. Some, particularly frogs, may hibernate in mud at the bottom of ponds. Their slowed metabolisms reduce their oxygen needs. It is generally not necessary to make holes in ice to allow them to breath in winter. Sunlight filtering through ice allow submerged plants to produce sufficient oxygen for more pond creatures.

Frogs lay their eggs in large clumps, up to 2000 in a year. Eggs may hatch after a few weeks and tadpoles develop into froglets in 2 – 3 months. Tadpoles begin as herbivores, feeding mainly on algae and soft vegetation. As they mature they become carnivorous, feeding on small insect larvae. Tadpoles can also secrete hormones which prevent the development of others, the fewer large tadpoles may then feed on their smaller kin. As their legs develop, tadpoles also begin to develop lungs. At this point, tadpoles require places to rest near the surface where they can easily access air, otherwise they may drown.

Toads lay their eggs in long strings, and may lay several hundred in a year. Their development is very similar to frogs though they may take up to 4 months to grow legs. Toads are generally more terrestrial than frogs, tending to walk rather than hop. They also often have drier, wartier skin which secretes toxins.

Newts generally lay their eggs singly, wrapping each on in a leaf. They may lay a few hundred in a year. The tadpoles can be distinguished from those of frogs and toads by their external gills. Newts are generally only seen in the ponds early in the year March – May, when they are breeding. The rest of the year they shelter under logs or fallen leaves.

Attracting amphibians

All amphibians require water in order to breed successfully. Young tadpoles are aquatic and require water with submerged vegetation to feed on. Therefore the best way to attract amphibians is to construct a pond. Ensure the pond has shallow areas planted with leafy submerged vegetation (often referred to as oxygenating plants), this will provide places for eggs to be laid as well as shelter and food for young tadpoles. Also ensure that an area around the edge of the pond is planted with covering vegetation to provide a cool damp area for amphibians to enter and exit the pond without being seen by predators.

Warm places

Site your pond so that at least two thirds of it will receive full sunlight, this will allow the pond to warm up and enable the amphibians to be more active. Logs and stones will warm up and retain heat, providing places for amphibians to warm up before going off to hunt.

Rotting plants in compost heaps provide good constant temperature and support more terrestrial amphibians like toads. Newts will also spend their second year out of the pond, sheltering in log piles or leaf litter. To avoid disturbing amphibians, turn your compost in summer when amphibians will not be hibernating.

Cool places

Amphibians are prone to drying out. Providing damp, shaded areas allows amphibians to cool off and rehydrate. Leave areas of tall grass, or plant large-leaved plants to provide places for amphibians to escape very warm weather.

Providing food

Allow the garden to be slightly less tidy. Allowing leaves and plants to slowly die back, rather than digging them up as soon as they've faded, harbours more insects and molluscs which amphibians feed on.

Reptiles

Handling reptiles

- Visitors can hold or pet reptiles, but have them crouch down first. This limits the distance the animal can fall if they escape or are dropped.
- If they feel the animal might get away visitors should let the animal go. They should never grip tighter.
- Visitors who just want to touch the animals should always stroke the animal head to tail. This is in the direction of the scales. Stroking against the scales causes the animal unnecessary stress.
- Some reptiles will defecate as a defence mechanism. Grass snakes have particularly strong poo, the smell from which is difficult to wash off. Handlers be warned!
- All participants should be encouraged to wash their hands with soap and warm water after the session as reptiles can harbour salmonella bacteria on their skin.

Background information

There are 10 reptile species which can be found in the UK, 4 of which are introduced. There are also 5 sea turtle species which can be found infrequently in surrounding waters. At LWC we have 3 reptile species, Common lizard (*Zootoca vivipara*), Slow worm (*Anguis fragilis*), and Grass snake (*Natrix natrix*). All of these were introduced to the site after construction.

The **common or viviparous lizard** is most easily seen basking on wood during warm sunny days. It is one of a few lizards which give birth to live young, incubating the eggs within their bodies. It is thought that this adaptation allows them to keep eggs at the correct temperature by moving to warmer or cooler locations. Most other UK reptiles rely on decaying vegetation to provide warmth to their eggs. Common lizards have 3 to 10 young per year and can live up to 12 years.

Slow worms are actually a type of lizard. They have lost their legs as an adaptation for burrowing through damp compost and leaf litter where they feed on slugs and worms. They give birth to young in egg membranes which they quickly break through. Lizard-like features to look for are the rounded lizard-y head, a lobed (not forked) tongue and blinking or eyelids. Snakes eyes are covered with a transparent scale, and so they do not blink. They are also able to detach their tails if attacked and can re-grow them. Slow worms are long lived, 30 years in the wild with one captive animal recorded living up to 54 years. They can have 3 – 25 young per year. They feed mostly on slugs and worms.

Grass snakes are the type of snake most likely to be seen in wet places. Their Latin name *Natrix* is likely derived from the Latin 'nature' meaning swim, in reference to their strong swimming ability. They are the UK's largest reptile, growing up to 190cm (6ft) in length. They lay up to 40 eggs which require a warm, humid environment; usually a pile of rotting vegetation. Grass snakes feed largely on amphibians like frogs and toads, but may also take worms and other invertebrates. They can live up to 15 years.

Attracting reptiles

Reptiles are cold blooded creatures, meaning they depend on the external environment to regulate their body temperature. In addition to providing places to attract the right prey items, providing places with different thermal properties is key in attracting reptiles.

Research what reptiles are found in your area and plan the wildlife area accordingly. Not only does this make it more likely that you will actually get reptiles to take up residence, but also the local populations by increasing their potential range.

Warm places

Logs, stones, pieces of carpet placed in a sunny location will warm up and retain the heat, providing places for reptiles to warm up before going off to hunt. Placing these in areas which catch morning or late afternoon light can be particularly effective. Warmth in the morning supports diurnal reptiles like common lizards. While areas which retain heat into the evening support reptiles which are active after dark.

Rotting plants in compost heaps provide good constant temperature and support burrowing reptiles like slow worms. Many reptiles will also lay their eggs in compost heaps. To avoid disturbing reptiles, turn your compost in summer when most reptiles will have finished breeding and reptiles are not hibernating.

Cool places

Reptiles can overheat. Providing damp, shaded areas, or a pond allows reptiles to cool off. Leave areas of tall grass, or plant large-leaved plants to provide places for reptiles to escape very warm weather.

Providing food

Allow the garden to be slightly less tidy. Allowing leaves and plants to slowly die back, rather than digging them up as soon as they've faded, harbours more insects and molluscs which lizards and slow worms feed on.

Planting nuts and allowing grasses and flowers to go to seed will provide food for small rodents and provide food for snakes.

