# Good Practice Guide: protecting Great Crested Newts during woodland management and forestry operations

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If you are relying on following good practice to keep within the law, then you:

- **must** take Preventative measures to protect Great Crested Newts
- **should** follow as many of the Top 5 actions to improve habitat for Great Crested Newts as you can.

## Introduction

The Great Crested Newt (*Triturus cristatus*) is a strictly protected amphibian species, safeguarded under both UK and European legislation due to its high conservation value.

With the exception of Anglesey, Great Crested Newts are largely absent from the Western half of Wales. North-East Wales - particularly in Flintshire, Wrexham, and Denbighshire - contain important populations and are considered of both UK and European importance for the species due to a high density of breeding ponds.

Great Crested Newts are also widespread in Powys, and parts of south east and south central Wales, from Gower to Monmouthshire.

In some regions the species has experienced long-term national declines, primarily due to habitat loss, pond degradation, and landscape fragmentation.

Great Crested Newts generally breed in medium to large ponds (typically 50-300 square metres) that support aquatic vegetation for egg-laying, have areas of open water for male courtship displays, and are subject to sunny warm conditions with minimal shading, especially on southern banks. However, other waterbodies may also be used.

Equally vital to their lifecycle, terrestrial habitats provide opportunities for foraging, shelter, dispersal, and hibernation. Newts may disperse up to 1 km from breeding ponds, though most remain within 250-500 metres, depending on habitat quality.

High-value terrestrial features where Great Crested Newts are likely to shelter, include dense undergrowth, brash and log piles, stone walls and rock/rubble piles, fallen deadwood (typically >15 cm in diameter), tree root systems and mammal burrows.

Woodland, particularly old-growth broad-leaved woodland, is especially valuable when close to breeding ponds. Large populations, which are usually associated with designated sites, may rely on broadleaf woodland and scrub at distances of up to 1km from breeding ponds.

The species thrives in mosaic landscapes combining grassland, scrub, and woodland, with hedgerows, deadwood, rock piles, and walls offering essential hibernation and refuge sites. Research has shown a direct correlation between the availability of fallen deadwood and population size.

Conservation of the Great Crested Newt in Wales depends on pond creation and restoration, terrestrial habitat enhancement, and landscape connectivity to support viable populations.

# How are Great Crested Newts protected?

Great Crested Newts are European Protected Species (EPS), protected under the Habitats Regulations.

This means you must avoid impacting them in a way that would be an offence, such as deliberately killing or injuring them, or deliberately or recklessly disturbing them, particularly to the extent that impairs their ability to survive, breed or hibernate or significantly impacts on the local population.

Damaging or destroying the breeding sites and resting places of Great Crested Newts could be an offence even if you do not do it deliberately. Great Crested Newt populations will rely on one or more breeding ponds and surrounding terrestrial habitat for breeding, hibernation, and foraging so these are the areas that require protection.

Appropriate woodland management has an important role to play in maintaining the habitat conditions they require, both in terms of proving suitable terrestrial habitat and in ensuring that breeding ponds do not deteriorate, for instance because of excessive shading or run-off. However, forest operations could have a catastrophic impact on the local population, if not managed sensitively.

Maintaining ecological functionality for Great Crested Newts may mean ensuring sufficient suitable and undisturbed terrestrial habitat is maintained around breeding ponds so that there is always somewhere safe (“refugia”) for the local population. Providing refugia is a necessary element of working lawfully, it is not just best practice.

Because every stage of the Great Crested Newt lifecycle takes place in or around the breeding pond, there is no clear ‘safe period’ when work can happen without risk. However, there are periods when they tend to be less active in the terrestrial habitat, so woodland activities can usually be timed to reduce the likely impacts. As with most species, Great Crested Newts are particularly sensitive to disturbance during the breeding season. Breeding takes place in the pond so avoiding works in close proximity to the water is critical.

Designing your woodland with Great Crested Newts in mind will make future working more straightforward. For instance, by not restocking right up to breeding ponds, so that the area can be retained primarily as habitat.

If you cannot avoid an offence by following this guidance, a competent ecologist may be able to develop alternative, site-specific, ways of working to enable you to keep within the law. If that is not possible, NRW may be able to issue a licence to enable you to carry out your work lawfully, but we can only do that if we are confident that there is no satisfactory alternative and that it will not harm the favourable conservation status of the species. EPS licences can only be issued as a last resort.

This Good Practice Guide has been approved by the Welsh Ministers as guidance under paragraph 43(9)(b) of the Conservation of Habitat and Species Regulations 2017. This means that a court must take it into account in proceedings relating to the offences of disturbing Great Crested Newts, or the damage and destruction of their breeding sites or resting places.

# Are Great Crested Newts using your woodland?

With the Mammal Society, we have produced a guide *Protected species in woodlands: A field guide for woodland managers in Wales,* containing specific advice on how to carry out surveys to check for protected species.

## Checking for records

Great Crested Newts are abundant in parts of Wales and largely absent in others.

Unless you are certain that you are outside of their known range, you should check for any records of Great Crested Newts within 1 km of your woodland. If you find records, you will need to look for potential breeding ponds when you do your walkover survey.

If you apply for a felling licence, NRW will check for records. If we find records that suggest the presence of Great Crested Newts, we will usually add an environmental condition to your felling licence requiring that you follow the measures in this guide. If your woodland is close to a protected site designated for Great Crested Newts, we may add bespoke conditions to your felling licence to ensure that these important populations are protected.

## Walkover survey

If you are within the range of Great Crested Newts and have found a record with 1 km of your work area, you will need to look for any waterbodies within 250 metres of your work area and assess their potential to be used as breeding ponds. *Protected species in woodlands: A field guide for woodland managers in Wales* will assist a competent person to do this.

If any waterbodies are assessed as suitable, you must assume that they are being used as breeding ponds and that the surrounding terrestrial habitat is also used.

However, if you want to be more certain whether Great Crested Newts are using a pond, you can commission a professional survey, eDNA surveys, if properly carried out, can now provide a relatively inexpensive way to confirm presence or absence in a waterbody.

If you already know that Great Crested Newts use your woodland, you can just proceed on that basis.

Before you can implement the preventive measures in the next section, you will need to have established the following:

1. Whether your woodland is within the anticipated range of Great Crested Newts in Wales and whether there are records of within 1 km of your work area; if so:
2. Whether any waterbody within 250 metres of your work area is suitable for use by Great Crested Newts and therefore assumed to be a breeding pond.

If you are not confident that you can assess the suitability of a waterbody for Great Crested Newts, you will need to bring in a competent ecologist to advise you. Alternatively, you can just take a precautionary approach and assume that any waterbodies are breeding ponds.

If you find that an historic record of a breeding pond relates to a waterbody that is no longer evident on the ground, or one that has clearly lost any potential to be used by Newts, you may be able to discount these. However, to protect yourself, you should carefully record the evidence before you carry out any work.

# Preventative measures to protect Great Crested Newts

If you are relying on following good practice to keep within the law, you will need to adhere to the following measures. If you cannot do this, a competent ecologist may be able to suggest site-specific mitigations that may allow you to deviate from these standard measures without causing an offence. If this is not possible, you may need to change your plans or consider applying for an EPS licence.

If you unexpectedly find evidence of the species during work, you should consider whether you are able to apply the measures in this guide, or seek advice from a competent ecologist.

If you are already operating under an EPS licence, you must continue to follow its terms and conditions.

When working within 250 metres of a confirmed or assumed breeding pond for Great Crested Newts the following must be adhered to:

**1. Measures to protect breeding ponds**

- Breeding ponds must be protected from any damage or disturbance.
- Avoid any pollution entering the pond, including siltation from run-off.
- Do not restock within at least 20 metres of the edge of the pond.
- Fell adjacent trees away from the pond to avoid cut material entering the pond.

**2. Measures to protect terrestrial habitat within 250 metres of breeding ponds**

- Limit works to no more than 25% of terrestrial habitat within this area in any one year.

- Mark and protect suitable habitat features from damage or disturbance (areas of thick undergrowth, log or brash piles, fallen deadwood, walls, or piles of stones etc.)
- Do not carry out any scarification, brash raking, hinge mounding, or other ground-disturbing restocking preparations.
- Do not stack brash or logs within the area unless they are to be left permanently *in situ* as habitat features and do not remove already-established log or brash piles.
- Avoid the use of skidders – ideally extract with a forwarder or skyline.
- Use as few extraction routes as possible to minimise ground impacts – where possible, utilise existing tracks.

**3. Additional measures to protect terrestrial habitat within 100 metres of breeding ponds**

- Do not work between 1 March and 30 June (key breeding season).
- Restrict work to daylight hours.
- Avoid the use of machinery like harvesters or forwarders, if possible. If they must be used, minimise movements within this area to only what is strictly necessary to fell and extract from that buffer zone.
- Felling cuts should be made least 20 cm above the ground.

# Top 5 actions to improve habitat for Great Crested Newts

Managing your woodland in line with the UKFS can deliver significant benefits for wildlife. The actions below would be particularly valuable for Great Crested Newts, and will also support many other species:

**1. Manage excessive shading of ponds**

Remove dense stands of trees from pond edges, do not restock in areas likely to cause shading, and control excessive regeneration.

**2. Maintain and create ponds nearby**

Ensure suitable ponds are present within or adjacent to woodland areas. Ponds should have clean water, abundant aquatic vegetation, and be free from fish, which prey on Great Crested Newt larvae.

**3. Enhance terrestrial habitat quality**

Improve woodland ground conditions by maintaining a mosaic of leaf litter, logs, brash piles, and undisturbed soil. These features provide shelter, foraging opportunities, and overwintering sites for Great Crested Newts.

**4. Ensure habitat connectivity**

Maintain and restore ecological corridors between ponds and terrestrial habitats. Connectivity through hedgerows, rough grassland, and scrub is essential for seasonal movements and genetic exchange.

5. **Manage biosecurity, control invasive species and predators**

Follow appropriate amphibian biosecurity protocols when working near ponds. Monitor and manage invasive plants and animals (for example fish in ponds, dense rhododendron thickets) that can degrade habitat quality or directly threaten Great Crested Newts.

# Further information

You can find more useful information on survey techniques and positive management approaches for Great Crested Newts:

Protected species in woodlands: A field guide for woodland managers in Wales

ARC Trust: Amphibian Habitat Management Handbook

Froglife: Great Crested Newt Conservation Handbook

English Nature: Great crested newt mitigation guidelines