

THE SEASONAL WORLD

The Season Of The Newts

RICHARD KERRIDGE

I didn't think I would see any. The pond was drab, empty. Reeds were still brown from winter. Crinkled leaves floated. It was too early in the year, and too cold. I walked around the pond. Beetles darted here and there. A leech lengthened and contracted like an elephant's trunk. Something about two sticks on the bottom, one across the other, made me look again. Thick little, muddy black sticks – but I saw it now, the line of crest running down each back, the blunt heads, transparent jelly round the eyes. Even the feet in the mud were clear now, with the toes ringed in yellow. Two male Great Crested Newts, motionless.

I crouched and leaned forward. A puff of mud and they were gone.

When I was a boy I hunted them fruitlessly. We all caught Smooth Newts in the park ponds. There were rumours of Great Cresteds. In the playground, Tony Luffingham boasted that he could get them, but never brought any. Someone talked about a pond down in Sussex, and we cycled out of London with vague directions. Near Uckfield, they said. We found a pond, perhaps the right one, and waded about until it was muddy soup and we had dragged every clump of weed onto the bank. Silently we picked through the weed. A dark female Smooth, fat and squashy, was caught in the weed; it was a noose round her body, too tight. I eased the loop over her head. She was the biggest Smooth I'd ever seen, plump with eggs. In my fingers she flapped like a fish. We said she was a Crested, but she wasn't.

I'd seen the illustrations. They were the biggest newts, black as fresh tar. An old book from the library called them The Great Crested or Warty Newt, or just The Warty Newt, for their skins were a surface of pimples, black caviar. Their golden eyes gleamed. I never saw one.

Sometimes I thought I'd glimpsed one, in the middle, in the great ravines of chokeweed.

But today I'd seen two. After dark I went back. Spots of rain pricked my cheeks. My beam on the weed found a toad: loose bag of a body, emptied of spawn, looking up. It tipped forward, swam jerkily, butting the bank. Small newts hung in the water.

There was a white shape over there, a carrier bag billowing, and next to it a male Great Crested in full display, arching his back. He twisted and corkscrewed, flashing his belly, yolk yellow blotched in black. The female walked towards him. Large and deliberate, she pushed past. He swam round to face her, high crest quivering. She pushed past again. He went into a paroxysm, painfully arched and twisting, over her head, and down with his nose to hers, body lifting. He let it lift. His tail went up, and body, and he was dancing vertically, nose down, writhing coil of black and yellow. She was still. His eyes were mad like a bull's.

Another male moved up next to him, smaller. As he turned, I saw that a leg was missing. Or, at least, the flesh. White and stiff, like an ivory toothpick, the bone jutted out. Something had pulled off all the tissue like a glove.

The female moved on.

For most of the year they live out of the water and tighten into drab, slow, rubbery lumps. Dust sticks to their bodies. The crests have gone. But in spring, in the ponds, those bodies soften and open out, like paper in water, or sea anemones when the tide returns. The males start to dance, their crests flaming. What does it feel like, that loosening and frenzy? What do the females

see, when this mad, bright creature coils twisting in front of them? They dance at night. The whole pond is darkness. Something must seep in through her porous skin, her froth of skin, softening her, filling her.

I switched off my torch. I had rain in my hair. A car went past. Houses were all around. Did people here know about these newts? Did they throng the banks when the season started, crisscrossing the pond with their torchlights, whispering and pointing? Why didn't they? It could be like the cranes in Nebraska.

Back at my car, under a streetlamp, something on the ground caught my eye. A female was poised on the edge of the kerb, gazing out like a gargoyle, flexing her toes, sensing the pond, tense at the huge things around her. My foot was inches away. What could her eyes and skin do with these lights and cruel tarmac? Once I would have gasped at this find. I carried her to the pond, cold in my hand, and to drop her in turned on my torch. The male was still dancing.

Richard Kerridge has twice won the *BBC Wildlife Award* for Nature Writing.

