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Inset: Pond skaters in the pond at
Airfield House



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Frog in the pond at Airfield House

AMPHIBIANS – FROGS AND NEWTS

Two of our three Irish resident amphibian species, frogs and newts, occur in Dublin City. Frogs seem to have been introduced to Ireland in the 1600s. No bones older than a few hundred years have ever been found in this country. The story goes, and is given credence by luminary Robert Lloyd Praeger in his book *The Way That I Went*, that frogs were introduced to Trinity College by Dr Gwithers – a fellow of Trinity – who was doing a study of the quadrupeds of Ireland in the latter part of the seventeenth century. Having failed to find any frogs while doing his baseline study, he introduced frogspawn to the ditch in College Park and from these college-educated frogs all the frogs of Ireland are descended. It should be relatively easy to ascertain by DNA studies if all our frogs are closely related – but do we really want to question a good story by looking for facts? Certainly there is no lack of frogs in the city. They only need ponds to mate and lay eggs. Once they have done this in February, and the frog spawn is fertilised, their duties as parents are over, and they quickly disperse from the ponds to live in long grass, feeding rapturously on flies and slugs and endearing themselves to gardeners. Frogs can live for up to twelve years, and each spring they emerge from hibernation and make for the pond where they were born, to mate and lay eggs. Tadpoles are food for fish, and indeed herons, so ponds and rivers well inhabited with fish will inevitably end up with very few frogs. Small



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Above right: Frogspawn in the pond at Airfield House
Below right: Tadpoles in the pond at Airfield House

fish-free ponds are the place to look for frogspawn and there are plenty of these in city gardens.

There are frogs in the grounds of Airfield House as well as newts in one of their ponds. This latter amphibian arrived in the water when the pond was being established as a teaching resource in recent times. It is the only species of newt native to Ireland – the Smooth newt *Triturus vulgaris*. This creature hibernates nearby during the winter and returns to its pond in spring to mate. This usually takes place in April and newt eggs are different to frogspawn – they are laid singly and are wrapped up in the leaves of plants. They hatch out into tadpoles in the water, but adult newts never lose their tails and resemble lizards in shape, although they are much smaller. After mating, adults leave the pond and hide under stones and pieces of timber by day. At night they emerge to feed on

worms, slugs and insects. They themselves, however, are on the menu for lots of creatures higher up on the food chain. Adult newts are preyed on by hedgehogs, stoats and rats, and the tadpoles are food for fish, water beetles and dragonflies.

The third Irish amphibian is the toad. The Common toad does not occur in Ireland at all although when people find a particularly large or warty specimen of frog they sometimes think they have found a toad. However, a simple check will quickly establish that it is a frog. Make it move and it will quickly hop away. It must be a frog because toads can't hop – only walk. Our native toad is the Natterjack toad and it only occurs on the Dingle and Iveragh peninsulas in Kerry. And of course being a Kerry species it doesn't content itself with walking – it runs!

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Newt on a leaf in the gardens of Airfield House



INSECTS AND OTHER CREEPY CRAWLIES

Dublin's waterways and waterbodies support a good collection of insects and other invertebrates. The most glamorous water insects are the dragonflies and their smaller relatives the damselflies. These strong flying colourful insects are carnivores and catch smaller insects on the wing. They fly up and down the canals in particular as they can rest on the tall reed vegetation along the banks. Dragonflies and

damselflies spend much of their lives as larvae in the water and they can only live in oxygen rich water. So their presence as adults is a good water quality indicator.

Anyone who has ever dipped a net into a pond to catch creepy crawlies will be aware that quite a variety of insect life can occur there. What a few dips with a net produces by way of species can tell you very quickly what state the water is



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Four-spotted chaser