

# Western Toads as Wildlife Ambassadors

By Howard O. Clark, Jr.

Chances are, most kids are being raised in an urban setting, and wildlife appreciation is likely not a top priority. Competition from other attention-grabbing activities pushes this important pastime down to the bottom of the list. However, there are ways to pique a child's curiosity toward the wild side. I currently reside in such an urban setting, but I do not allow such a disposition to hold back on natural explorations. Surprisingly, our yard each evening comes alive with a rather ubiquitous and adaptable amphibian, the Western toad (*Anaxyrus boreas*). During the day the toads hide under garden rocks, decorative railroad ties and other items that provide sufficient cover and moisture. After the sun sets, hoards of toads hop out of their hiding places in search of insects and invertebrates. I do not use pesticides so there are plenty of choices for the toads. My compost pile provides a source of food too—from beetle grubs to worms.

My daughter has taken a special interest in our toad population. I began showing her the toads in our yard a few years ago in order to get her acclimated to something typically considered "slimy and gross." Now she asks to see the toads and several times a week before bath time we head out on a toad hunt. Sometimes she picks up the toads herself, but oftentimes asks me to do the initial grabbing. She is quick to take the toad from me, being careful to watch out for the emptying of the bladder toads are well-known for. She brings the catch into the light and carefully examines it. She recently no-



Western toad (*Anaxyrus boreas*) in a Fresno County, CA, backyard. Photo: Howard O. Clark, Jr.

ticed that they have little hands that look astonishing similar to human hands. I instruct her to hold the toad very carefully and not squeeze too hard. She is thrilled that some toads squeak (the males) and some don't (the females).

At five years old, my daughter is gaining an appreciation of nature which will hopefully stick with her for the rest of her life. During her 5<sup>th</sup> birthday party, we invited her pre-school friends and neighbors for a day of celebration. After the initial festivities some of the children ran off to the garden. I took this opportunity to catch a toad and explain the difference between a toad and frog, two species oftentimes confused for one another. The children were thrilled at the discovery and I believe repeated positive experiences such as these will enhance their understanding of nature and wildlife.

These sorts of activities no doubt provide a high level of enrichment crucial to developing young minds. I encourage everyone with young children or grandchildren to find similar activities so that nature can be an important part of their lives. Too often I see parents overreact when their kids try to get closer looks at nature, but with a little education on the parents' part, and with good judgment, natural exploration can be fun and exciting.

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Certified Wildlife Biologist Howard Clark showing a Western toad (*Anaxyrus boreas*) to a group of children. Photo: Becky Chase.

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