

Frogs and Toads As Pets?

THEY'LL KEEP YOU HOPPING!



Many boys and girls have dogs and cats as pets. And you'd like something different. Maybe a frog or toad? And maybe if you and your friends all owned frogs or toads you could have some super jumping contests? Well, there are some things you should know about these creatures before you take the leap.

For one thing, frogs and toads are amphibians. This means they spend part of their lives on land; part in water. So where do you put your new pet? A half-filled bathtub with a few big rocks in it just might be the answer. Unfortunately, mothers and fathers and aunts and grandparents take an awful lot of baths. And they might not like finding a cousin of Kermit in the same water. If you hear a scream from the bathroom, it's time to find a new home for your pet.

But there's no doubt that frogs are happiest in or near water. Indeed, frogs are born in water, from one of a jelly-like mass of eggs, and never have to learn to swim. When a tadpole hatches, it has a soft-skinned, streamlined body with a thin, active tail that acts as a rudder. Like a fish, it breathes through gills. A tadpole is a larva--out of the egg, but not yet a frog. You could compare it to a caterpillar that later becomes a butterfly.

Is it a frog? Or is it a toad?

Frogs and toads always know which is which, but it's not so easy for us. In general, toads are heavier and more squat than frogs--their bodies are usually wider and shorter. A toad has warty-looking skin that is thicker than a frog's. Frogs' skin is moist and smooth. Toads can live at greater distances from water than frogs can and are often found in desert areas.

Both frogs and toads have shorter bodies than other amphibians do. Their legs are longer and stronger, and they are great leapers and hoppers. Many pet frogs escape from their owners, but others become racing frogs, and may even win a trophy or two.

A frog's favorite habitat is a warm swamp or a forest, but frogs live almost anywhere except the Arctic and Antarctica. There are about 90 species of frogs in North America.

Why do frogs croak and call?

Male frogs and toads attract their mates by calling. A male bullfrog calls out "jug-o-rum," and on spring nights hoptoads make a high musical call with lots of notes. The frog makes his call with a closed mouth; so if your pet frog looks like he hasn't said a thing, don't trust him. The

sound actually comes from a puff of air passing back and forth from the lungs to the mouth across the vocal chords.

A pouch in the middle of its throat, or two pouches on either side of the throat, swells up when the frog calls and makes the call much louder. The piping call of the spring peeper can be heard a *mile* away, even though this tiny frog is no bigger than the end of your thumb!

Your Frog's Parents

Frog parents are pretty careless by human standards. Depending on the species, a female frog or toad lays between 1,000 and 20,000 eggs at a time, usually in water. But few frogs guard their eggs, although some species make nests, or even carry the eggs in their mouths or in sacs on their backs. But for most species, the eggs are protected only a jelly-like material that holds them together. From these eggs come tadpoles, of which only a tiny percentage survive to become frogs and toads.

"Five flies and a dozen mosquitoes, please."

Insects are what frogs and toads like to eat best, and both are good hunters. The frog, for example, finds its food with its eyes. It flicks out its long tongue, catches the insect in mid-air, and flips the insect right into its throat. If you've ever tried to catch a flying insect, you know that a frog has to be F-A-S-T!

Notice that your own tongue is attached to your body at the back of your mouth. A frog's tongue can be used like a whip, because it is attached near the front of the mouth. Also, it has a sticky tip that makes the tongue a fine insect trap. The ideal way to feed a pet frog is to let insects loose inside its box or terrarium; that way, the frog has the pleasure of catching them himself.

Because they eat a huge number of insects, including those that are harmful to humans and those that destroy crops, frogs are considered friends of man. Cutworms, flies, and beetles are some examples.

Frogs also eat a surprising variety of other small animals. A group of biologists once found a poisonous coral snake in the stomach of a bullfrog. Sometimes a frog tries to eat a larger animal: first, it sinks its teeth into the animal, then it uses its front feet to grab the animal and stuff it into its mouth. Frogs' teeth don't cut or grind very well, so prey is usually swallowed whole.

"Eek! That toad will give you warts!"

Because of the bumpy spots on some toads' skin, some people think that toads are covered with warts. Not true. The "warts" are really glands that give off a kind of poison that protects the toad from its enemies. Scientists believe that human warts are caused by viruses.

Now that you know what frogs eat, you might be interested in other animals that eat frogs. One of them is man. The meaty hind legs of some of the larger frogs are considered a delicacy. In North America, bullfrog legs show up on the menus of some very elegant restaurants. In other parts of the world, your main dish might be the hind legs of a leopard frog or a pig frog.