

Frog spawning is now well underway, which means spring has truly sprung. Each spring, following their winter slumber, frogs return to the same wetland area to spawn. The Common Frog (*Rana temporaria*) is the most recognisable of three amphibian species found in Ireland, the others being the elusive Smooth newt and the nocturnal Natterjack toad. All three species and the breeding and resting places of frogs and newts are protected nationally under the Wildlife Acts 1976-2012.

Our wetlands are a great resource for these and many more types of wildlife. Using wetland vegetation to help identify the wetland type present is a skill you may already possess. Determined by the type of soil and how often it's flooded, different types of wetlands have strong plant associations: heather and mosses on acid bogs; grass-like sedges on alkaline fens; herbaceous grasses and sedges on mineral rich marshes, and; emergent tall reeds and rushes in mineral rich, muddy swamp waters. Westmeath wetland habitats in particular support the species of birds we most associate with the midlands; threatened bird species such as curlew, lapwing, golden plover and snipe, and more common ones like mallard, moorhen and coot.

Wetlands do not only benefit nature. They provide us with direct services such as water supplies for livestock, flood prevention and water purification. Many wetlands act as sinks to collect surface water and to filter pollutants and sediment from this water. Soil bacteria surrounding plant roots can break down pollutants, a process we have adapted for the safe disposal of human waste by reedbed systems. Wetlands improve our lives by providing fishing, hunting and recreational activities, tourism, education and cultural amenity, all feeding directly into the local economy.

Local wetland patches create a stepping stones network throughout the landscape over which plants and animals can travel, vital in maintaining healthy populations in the designated core habitats that receive the greatest levels of legal protection. For this reason even the most mundane pond or wetland area can be a significant part of the greater conservation effort.

From global warming to littering, of the many threats that our wetlands face in Westmeath, infilling and draining are of greatest concern. To prevent on-going wetland loss, these sites are given legal protection in our national legislation and planning permission is required in most cases to infill or drain wetlands.

Make this spring your time to learn about and protect the plants and animals supported by our wetlands habitats. A booklet on 'Our Wetlands Heritage' produced by the Irish Wildlife Trust is available for free download here: <http://www.heritagecouncil.ie/wildlife/publications/> or why not join the 'Hop to It Frog Survey 2015' and report your sightings to the Irish Peatlands Conservation Council using their online form at <http://www.ipcc.ie/>