The common spadefoot toad is a small (up to 8 cm long) amphibian with a round body. It has smooth skin and large eyes. Colour-wise, individuals vary greatly - some are completely grey, while others may be greyish brown or greyish green in colour. Younger and more mature tadpoles are brownish, while older ones have a more greyish brown or greyish green hue. One of the most distinctive features of the common spadefoot toad apart from other frogs, however, is its ability to store up sufficient amounts of energy before hibernation. The common spadefoot toad often has reddish dots on its sides.
Why has the common spadefoot toad become rare?
A large number of small water bodies in Europe were destroyed in the 20th century. The remaining water bodies often suffer from deteriorated quality – they become polluted, muddy or invaded by fish. The common spadefoot toad is strongly affected by the loss of water bodies and deteriorated water quality, as it needs water for breeding and for tadpole growth. In addition to water bodies the toad also needs high-quality terrestrial habitats – a mosaic landscape with small fields, garden plots, meadows and small woods. Scrub-invaded areas or intensively farmed landscape rob the toad of the possibility to move among water bodies and to find sufficient food and places for burrowing. Thus, most of the remaining common spadefoot populations are small and isolated and therefore very threatened.

What has happened to water bodies?
The most common reasons for the loss or deteriorated quality of small water bodies are the following:
• scrub invasion and overgrowth
• excessive use of agricultural toxins and fertilizers
• landfills and drainage of water bodies
• populating water bodies with fish

Fish feed on the spawn and tadpoles of amphibians and on aquatic invertebrates. Fish also stir up the bottom sediment in water bodies and destroy aquatic plants, thus throwing the ecosystem of small water bodies out of balance. The water becomes opaque and oxygen-deficient. Such a water body is no longer suitable for amphibians and various aquatic invertebrates to live and breed in.

Protection of the common spadefoot toad in Estonia

Due to the shrinking distribution area and decreasing numbers, the common spadefoot toad has been included in Annex IV of the European Union Habitats Directive as a species in need of strict protection. In Estonia, the common spadefoot toad is a category II protected species. Active protection efforts of the species in Estonia began in 2003, when first breeding ponds were restored. Since 2004, small water bodies have been managed annually in the various regions of Estonia, contributing also to the breeding of the common spadefoot toad.

In 2010, the project “Securing Leucorrhinia pectoralis and Pelobates fuscus in the northern distribution area in Estonia and Denmark” (DRAGONLIFE) was launched under the European Union LIFE+ Nature programme, with the aim to protect the small and isolated populations of these two species. The project was ended at the year 2014, and during this time 111 small water bodies were created or restored in Estonia. The projects activities in Estonia are funded by the LIFE programme and the Estonian Environmental Board.

How can I help the common spadefoot toad?
The small ponds have an impact on many living beings – we can provide them with favourable living conditions or destroy them. Every pond-keeper actually takes certain steps so that the small pools of water could please the owners and at the same time provide suitable living conditions for lots of species.

Keep in mind that helping one species will also benefit others, as many species need good-quality water bodies with clean water!

Do not populate small water bodies with fish!
If you still want to grow fish, leave some ponds empty, so that amphibians and various aquatic invertebrates could breed in them.

Preserve small ponds and pools of water and keep scrub away from the pond banks. This way you will preserve the drome and the lovely landscape.

Leave some of uninvaded land around ponds that are situated in the fields. An unploughed stretch of only 5 m already prevents fertilizers from entering water bodies and leaves a foraging area for amphibians at the edge of water bodies.

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What can I do for the common spadefoot toad?

- Keep in mind that helping one species will also benefit others, as many species need good-quality water bodies with clean water!
- Do not populate small water bodies with fish!
- Leave some of uninvaded land around ponds that are situated in the fields. An unploughed stretch of only 5 m already prevents fertilizers from entering water bodies and leaves a foraging area for amphibians at the edge of water bodies.
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FOR MORE INFORMATION
Homepage of the Estonian Environmental Board:
www.keskkonnaamet.ee
Homepage of the DRAGONLIFE project:
www.keskkonnaamet.ee/dragonlife
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