

# Cane toads

*Bufo marinus*



The cane toad (*Bufo marinus*) is not a declared pest in Queensland, so there is no legal requirement to control them.

Their original introduction in 1935 was to control agricultural pests, but they proved ineffective.

For the past 60 years, cane toads have been expanding their territory in Australia, and are capable of colonising at least four of the mainland Australian states.

As the toad's geographical range continues to expand, concern has increased about their detrimental environmental effects, particularly on the wetlands of the Northern Territory.

Studies into the feasibility of biological control have commenced.

## History of introduction and spread

The cane toad or giant toad (*Bufo marinus*) is an amphibian, native to Central and South America. They have been introduced throughout the world as a biological control for insect pests of agriculture, most notably sugarcane.

A consignment of cane toads from Hawaii was released into Queensland cane fields in 1935. The introduction was surrounded by controversy as to the potential costs and benefits to Australia.

It was hoped that the toad would control Frenchi and greyback beetles—pests of economic importance to the sugarcane industry.

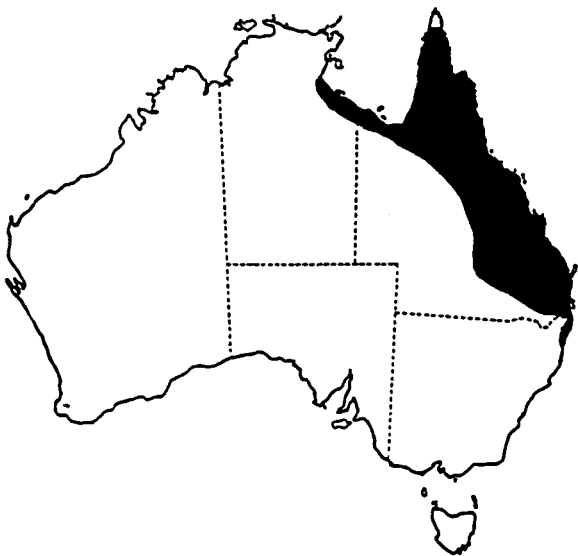


By 1941, however, it had become evident that the cane toad was exerting only limited control over its intended prey. There were two main reasons for this:

- Greyback beetles are only rarely in contact with the ground and Frenchi beetles invade cane fields at a time when the toads are absent due to a lack of protective cover.
- The cane toad has a wide-ranging and indiscriminate diet, and it was not solely dependant upon its intended prey.

The unlimited food source, suitable environment and low rates of predation allowed dynamic reproduction and spread. Toads were recorded in Brisbane only 10 years after release. The toad continues to thrive and has now invaded the Northern Territory and New South Wales (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1** Current distribution of the cane toad



The cane toad's advance is only limited by environmental factors, such as the availability of water for breeding, tolerable temperatures, suitable shelter and an abundance of food

Toads at the frontier of their range of expansion may be larger than those in established populations. This is most probably due to greater food supply, combined with a lower incidence of disease.

## Description and general information

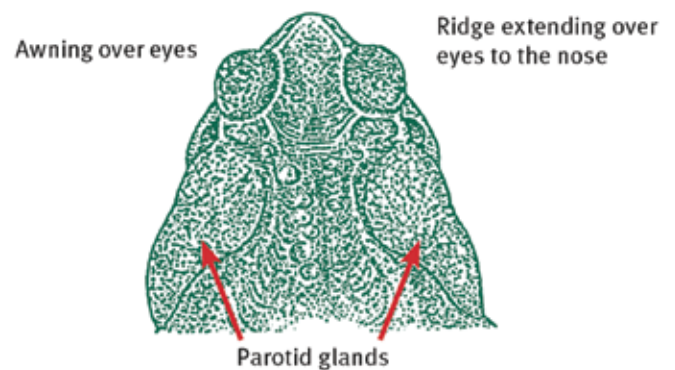
In comparison with native frog and toad species, adult cane toads have a distinctive head and face, and are large and heavily built creatures (adults may grow to 20 cm).

Following their aquatic larval stages (eggs and tadpoles), cane toads are generally encountered at night near any source of light. Cane toads are ground-dwelling—they are poor climbers and unable to jump very high.

A definite visor or awning extends over each eye and a high angular bony ridge extends from the eyes to the nose.

The parotid glands (see Figure 2) are perhaps the most characteristic feature of the adult cane toad. These glands are large, protuberant, and are situated on the head behind each ear. These glands carry a toxin.

**Figure 2** Distinguishing features of the cane toad



The cane toad's hands and feet are relatively small and lack discs at the tips of the digits. Webbing is absent between the fingers but is distinct and leathery between the toes.

Colouring on the dorsal (upper) surface may be brown, olive-brown or reddish-brown. The ventral (under) surface varies from white to yellow and is usually mottled with brown.

Warts are present on all cane toads; however, males possess more than females. Warts are dark brown at the caps.

## Mating

Mating can occur at any time of the year and depends only on available food and permanent water. The mating call is a continuous purring trill that sounds like a running motor.

In situations where females are scarce or absent, male cane toads may have the ability to undergo a sex change to become fertile females; however, this has not been proved.

## Eggs

Both cane toads and native frogs spawn in slow-moving or still water, but their eggs can be easily distinguished.

Cane toad eggs are laid in long, gelatinous ‘strings’ with the developing tadpoles appearing as a row of small black dots along the length. The strings are unique to cane toads, with native frogs eggs laid in clusters, generally appearing as blobs of jelly attached to water plants or debris. Native frogs generally produce egg clusters as mounds of foam floating on the water surface.

Compared with native species, cane toad egg production is dynamic and a single clutch can contain up to 35 000 eggs. Remove any cane toad eggs found in the water and allow to dry out.

**Figure 3 Drawing of toad spawn from *Wildlife of greater Brisbane*, page 166**



## Tadpoles

The cane toad is the only species in Australia that has a pure black tadpole. Native frogs have lighter-coloured undersides with a great range of colours and markings—cane toad tadpoles may turn paler colours to almost transparent at night.

Cane toad tadpoles are small and usually congregate in vast, slow-moving shoals. This ‘shoaling’ behaviour is uncharacteristic of most native species.

Unlike cane toad tadpoles, native species develop lungs at an early stage and periodically rise to the surface in order to exchange their lung gasses. Large groupings of tadpoles that do not break the water surface for air indicate cane toads.

## Young toads

Following emergence from the water, the young toadlets usually congregate around the moist perimeter of the water body for about a week before they eventually disperse.

Young toads are very difficult to distinguish from the native *Uperoleia* species, which also have parotid glands, but all *Uperoleia* species have bright red patches in the groin area.

Under ideal conditions toadlets may reach adult size within a year.

## Toxicity

*Bufo marinus* produce venom in glands occurring in most of the skin on their upper surface. The venom is concentrated in the parotid glands as a creamy-white solution, which is released when the animal experiences extreme provocation or direct localised pressure (e.g. grasped by the mouth of a predator).

The parotid solution is highly toxic and when ingested it produces drastic acceleration of the heartbeat, shortness of breath, salivation and prostration. It is extremely painful if accidentally rubbed into the eye.

Ingestion of toads by domestic and most native animals can result in death. In some recorded cases, death has occurred within 15 minutes.

Field observations suggest that some predatory Australian species have learned how to feed safely on cane toads.

Birds have been observed flipping toads over to avoid the parotid glands. Predatory reptiles may have more trouble adapting, being unable to remove a toad from the mouth once they start feeding.

## Effects on wildlife

The cane toad is poisonous at all stages of its life cycle and most native frog larvae and many aquatic invertebrates are dramatically affected by their presence.

Cane toads are voracious feeders that consume a wide variety of insects, frogs, small reptiles, mammals and even birds. Perhaps the only limiting factor to the prey taken is the width of the cane toad’s mouth.

It has been suggested that cane toad competition for food and breeding grounds has been responsible for reducing the populations of some native frogs. However, many native frogs are arboreal (tree-dwelling) and occupy different niches. Cane toads don’t have the native frogs’ ability to ‘shut down’ during dry seasons when resources are limited.

Pressure from cane toads may displace native animals (frogs and other species) where they already suffer due to manipulation of their habitat by humans and grazing animals. Animals that use waterholes as retreat sites during the dry season are especially vulnerable—toads will congregate here in large numbers.

## Public health

Cane toads readily eat animal and human faecal material and, in areas of poor hygiene, they have been known to transmit disease such as salmonella.

## Control

Control of the cane toad has never been enforced and has remained at the discretion of the individual. Recently, the Brisbane City Council established the Cane Toad Eradication Committee that urges residents to exercise greater control of the pest.

Freezing is the most humane form of treatment. As a reaction to cold, cane toads initiate dormancy and eventually die in their sleep.

Fencing is recommended to keep toads out of ponds intended for native fish and frogs; a height of 50 cm is sufficient. Bird wire with 1 cm holes may keep toads out of an area.

CSIRO are investigating organisms for biological control. However, exhaustive testing would be necessary to ensure that viral or bacterial agents are cane toad specific and not harmful to native species.

## Injured or 'lost' frogs

Brisbane Forest Park 07 3300 4855

Wildlife Preservation  
Society of Queensland 07 3221 0194

Queensland Museum 07 3840 7555

WILVO's Wildlife Volunteer's Organistaion (check your local phone directory to see if a group operates in your area).

## Further information

Further information is available from your local government office, or from your local primary industries and fisheries biosecurity officer: contact details are available through 13 25 23.

Fact sheets are available from Queensland Primary Industries and Fisheries service centres and the Queensland Primary Industries and Fisheries Business Information Centre (telephone 13 25 23). Check our website at [www.dpi.qld.gov.au](http://www.dpi.qld.gov.au) to ensure you have the latest version of this fact sheet. The control methods referred to in this pest fact should be used in accordance with the restrictions (federal and state legislation, and local government laws) directly or indirectly related to each control method. These restrictions may prevent the use of one or more of the methods referred to, depending on individual circumstances. While every care is taken to ensure the accuracy of this information, Queensland Primary Industries and Fisheries does not invite reliance upon it, nor accept responsibility for any loss or damage caused by actions based on it.

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