

Tip Of The Tail —



Bufo Marinus – The Giant Marine Toad

The Bufo toad first came to Florida in 1955 and was accidentally released at the Miami International Airport by a dealer importing specimens from Australia to be sold as pets. They were later released into sugar cane fields to help control mice and rats. While thriving in areas with man-made bodies of water such as canals and drainage fields, they often drive out native species of toads because they will eat a wide variety of food sources. The Bufo will eat dead insects, dog/cat food and even baby rodents right out of their nests while most toads will only eat live insects. Their range has expanded significantly in South Florida. Their heavily built body of up to 2 pounds and 9 inches long has short legs and no webbing between the toes. A key feature of their anatomy is an external salivary gland behind each eye where you expect an ear to be. This is where their clear or milky white toxin is excreted when the toad is disturbed or annoyed such as being picked up in the mouth of a dog. The toxin affects the nervous system and the heart. It is similar in action to the cardiac drug digitalis. The tadpoles and eggs are also toxic, but usually to a lesser degree.



When a pet is exposed, the toxin is irritating to the lips and gums and will salivate excessively and paw at their mouth. Sometimes, but not always, the gums will turn a brick red color. It is difficult to determine the amount of toxicity, but small breeds are often more severely affected. The toxin can be absorbed through the mucous membranes and doesn't necessarily need to be ingested. If enough toxin is absorbed, the pet will begin to vomit followed by heart arrhythmias, breathing problems, seizures and possibly death.

The most important thing you, as a pet owner, can do is immediately flush and wipe out the mouth to remove as much of the poison as possible before it is absorbed. Point the head down and flush across mouth and not down the throat. You do not want to drown your pet while trying to save him. A towel can be used to wipe the poison out of the mouth and off the lips. After decontaminating the mouth, call your veterinarian or emergency clinic. There is not a specific antidote, but we can alleviate some of the clinical signs. It may take 10 or 15 minutes for some of the more serious signs to appear, especially in smaller pets. I often tell owners of large dogs to rinse/wipe the mouth and observe them for 15 minutes, but I tell owners of small dogs to rinse/wipe the mouth and get them examined right away.

There are a few things we can do to decrease the chance of your pet having an experience with a Bufo toad. First, control insects in your yard by keeping lights off and using appropriate insecticides. Do not leave your pet's food or water bowls outside. When out for walks, keep your pets on a leash especially in the morning and early evening. Keeping Bufo toads out of your yard requires completely enclosing the yard with mesh screens that extend at least 20 inches above the ground and 4 inches below the ground. Natural ways to control Bufo toad populations are being investigated, but does not look promising at this time.

Exposure to Bufo toads can result in minimal to no problems at all, but if left untreated or unnoticed, can be fatal especially in smaller animals.