



How Did the Toadlet Cross the Road?

One musician's 10-year campaign to save toads inspired a song and brought his community together

Text and photos by Isabelle Groc

Shortly after he moved with his wife, Libby, to a small rural community in the Cowichan Valley on Vancouver Island in 1996, Kent Ball noticed small black dots moving on the road near his house during the month of August. He soon realized they were juvenile western toads migrating from the wetland where they were born to the forest where they live the rest of their lives.

The annual summer migration was a dangerous journey for the tiny toads, as they often ended up being squished by passing cars. "I was driving like most people do in our neighbourhood," Ball says now. "You stop and realize, 'Oh these are living things.' They are no competition to a tire on a vehicle."

Western toads (*Anaxyrus boreas*) are listed under the federal Species at Risk Act as "of special concern": reports say they are at risk because of "habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation, including intersection of seasonally used habitats by roads."

Ball, a 60-year-old cement truck driver originally from Moose Jaw, Sask., could not stand the carnage and decided to step in to save those toadlets, no bigger than a fingernail. "I have grandchildren. And I would like to think that in their adulthood, they too will be able to carry on protecting nature and giving it a hand." He scooped up a few toadlets in an empty coffee cup and carried them across the road.

Ball was not going to save all the toads with a coffee cup. The following summer, after doing some research and consulting with a local biologist, he put up wooden stakes in the ground, stapled fences to them, and funnelled the toadlets into ice

cream buckets so he could carry them across the road in large numbers while he himself dodged traffic. Ball convinced local hardware stores to donate supplies and approached a sign-maker to help him make signs that would alert drivers to the presence of toads on the road.

Summer after summer, rescuing toads during the week-long migration became Ball's mission. He would arrive at first light: "If there were a lot of toads coming, then I would phone in to work and take the day off and I would man the traps for the day, and then the next day, and then the next day, until basically they had finished coming across the road," Ball recalls.

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Ball estimates he rescued 50,000 toads per year, half a million over 10 years. And each year, more people joined Ball in his efforts. "Eventually, people took notice of what I was doing and said, 'Can we help you?' They would get out of their cars, and actually come and help me. The neighbourhood got behind me, so I was no longer the only person running around saving toads."

In this rural area where people did not know each other, saving toads also allowed Ball to meet his neighbours and create a new sense of community. "It helped the whole community because people were joining together," Ball says. "Nature can bring people together when they are together to help nature."

Ball is also a professional musician, and he says he was inspired by the toads' unique sense of rhythm. "Toads hop, and a lot of hopping also goes on when you are playing music." He describes having a dream of being on the road and fearing for his life as traffic whizzed by. When he woke up, he had a tune in his head. "I imagined myself as a toadlet sitting on the side of the road and trying to guess when the best time would be to hop across the road and get to the other side. I imagined that I better boogie and get across the road as quickly as possible."

The "Three-Toad Boogie" was born. "I hope that it is going to get people tapping their toes, and when they hear the song it is going to make them think of the western toad's plight, and maybe people will get together and say, 'Well, I am going to stand up, and I am going to help out.'" 🎵

A ROAD TO THE FUTURE
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