**Addendum: Mystery Animal**

**California newt (Amphibians)**  
Taricha torosa

The California newt, that distinctive coastal **salamander** with the orange and brown two-tone paint job, secretes a deadly toxin about a hundred times as dangerous as cyanide, and can cause swift and unpleasant death by respiratory failure. Though at least one human fatality has been reported involving someone who swallowed newts on a dare, you can also take in enough of the poison by picking up a California newt if you've got an open sore on your hand. Snakes are immune to the toxin, but you aren't. A word to the wise!

As long as you don't pick them up, let alone eat them, California newts are one of the most engaging wild animals endemic to California. Ranging from five to eight inches in total length, **they mainly make themselves apparent during the rainy seasons.** That's when males and females head out of their forest floor burrows toward open water, where they engage in some of the wildest orgies California wildlife has to offer.

Newts will head for their breeding ponds in such numbers that at least one road, South Park Drive in Berkeley, is closed seasonally to prevent dozens of road kills per day.

Like many animals, California newts change their appearance during their breeding phase. Males' tails flatten out vertically, providing the boys with better swimming ability. Their usually pebbly skin smooths out as well. Females undergo similar but more subtle changes. When a female enters a breeding pond, she's usually mobbed, the males forming a ball of writhing newts with the female at the center. The male most persistent in just hanging on fertilizes her eggs, which she then attaches to submerged vegetation in clusters of up to 50.

Those eggs hatch out in anywhere from two to six weeks, depending on variables such as water temperature, and the juvenile newts, much like tadpoles, may stay in their birth pond as long as a year. They then lose their aquatic tails and their gills, grow stronger legs, and hike off into the woods. They prey on insects, worms, and other very small animals, and then return to their birth pond to mate at around age three.

With a range running **along the coast from Mendocino County to the Santa Ana Range, California newts are a familiar sign of the change of seasons across much of the state. It starts raining and the newts cross the road.** Who says we don't have seasons?