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ARG today

Newsletter of the Amphibian and Reptile Groups of the United Kingdom

Spring 2007

NARRS – the national surveys begin

Chris Gleed Owen,
Research & Monitoring Officer, HCT

The National Amphibian and Reptile Recording Scheme, or NARRS for short, is a project to establish herpetofauna surveys and monitoring schemes across the UK. These aim to gather information on the 'conservation status' of species, to help predict and improve their future prospects. NARRS is coordinated by The Herpetological Conservation Trust (The HCT), with a broad partnership of statutory bodies and voluntary organisations such as ARG UK.

The key to NARRS surveys is the support of Amphibian and Reptile Groups (ARGs) throughout the UK, although not all surveyors are members of an ARG. In this respect, NARRS aims to encourage volunteers to join ARGs, and to promote a larger, stronger ARG network.

Spring 2007 sees the launch of two new NARRS surveys to measure the status of our widespread amphibian and reptile species. Many of us are concerned that widespread species are declining nationally, yet we do not have the data to back it up. The solution is to survey a nationally representative sample of sites using consistent methods, and to repeat this over time to identify trends.

The National Amphibian Survey aims to identify the amphibian species present in a random sample of ponds spread across the UK. It will target the newt breeding season (roughly April-May). At present it does not include the frog and toad (anuran) spawning season, but this may be considered in the future. It should be possible to encounter anuran larvae during newt surveys anyway. Each surveyor is allocated a one-kilometre square from a set of random squares in their area. A single pond is then selected and surveyed using visual/egg search, netting, torching and the great crested newt Habitat Suitability Index (HSI). Up to three visits may be required to ensure all the species present have been encountered.

Common toad - photo by Fred Holmes

The National Reptile Survey aims to discover all the reptile species present in a random sample of one-kilometre squares across the UK. Reptiles are harder to detect than amphibians, so the survey needs to target the best areas of habitat in each square. Up to three visits are necessary, using a combination of visual search and artificial refugia (where permitted and safe to do so). Visits should last two to three hours and be in appropriate conditions. They should focus on the spring when the weather is cool and reptiles are most easily detected (roughly April-May), although visits can continue into the summer if the surveyor wishes.

Some potential surveyors feel they need training before they can confidently take part in these surveys, so with the help of numerous people, we have set up a series of training days across the UK. These will involve classroom and field sessions covering identification, habitat assessment, survey methods, instructions and protocols, health and safety, licensing and landowner permissions. The survey pack given to participants includes identification guides, guidance notes, survey forms and a landowner introduction letter.

Most wildlife surveys rely on the generosity of volunteers giving their time and NARRS is no exception. Volunteer surveyors are currently being recruited through the website, and over 450 have signed up so far! If you want to join in the fun this spring, go to www.narrs.org.uk and register to take part. You will find further details of the surveys and a list of training events.

Acknowledgements

The NARRS team at The HCT would like to thanks all the participants and supporters of NARRS, particularly Natural England, Countryside Council for Wales, Scottish Natural Heritage, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, SITA Trust and the Landfill

Communities Fund for funding. We are especially grateful to all those individuals, ARGs and other groups who have worked hard to set up training days this spring.

Who's leading NARRS?

NARRS is being run by the Herpetological Conservation Trust, (HCT). The NARRS team are John Baker john.baker@herpconstrust.org.uk and Chris Gleed-Owen chris.go@herpconstrust.org.uk (tel. 01202 391319).

Editorial

David Orchard
Editor of ARG Today

The survey season is now well underway and many of you will now be visiting the famous "NARRS squares" or taking part in other ARG surveys. A lot has happened since the last issue of *ARG today* and some of the more notable happenings are covered in this issue.

In January we had the second successful conference organised by ARG UK, the Herpetofauna Workers Meeting (HWM) - see the review later in this issue. The success of the weekend was mainly thanks to the hard work of Jan Clemons and Chris Gleed Owen from ARG UK, who did most of the organising, and HCT who provided support for the event.

Thanks to the success of this years conference, we are again able to offer free insurance to ARGs, taking some of the pressure off running groups and arranging activities.

Some new ARGs, such as the Buckinghamshire ARG, have recently been formed and the network is going from strength to strength. The National Amphibian and Reptile Recording Scheme (NARRS), being co-ordinated by HCT, has created a national project for the ARGs to focus on. The training aids provided by HCT have helped get the project off to a great start with over 46 courses being held around Britain this spring.

ARG UK has worked closely with HCT over the last year and this co-operation is already benefiting both organisations, leading to some joined up thinking on a range of issues.

I hope you enjoy this edition of the newsletter and find some items of interest. Please write in with your experiences from the surveying season - particularly if you think it will help or inspire others. Please send any articles to me at Dorchard@arg-uk.org.uk by the end of July.

Making Compost Count for Slow-Worms

Gareth Matthes

If you go down to the garden today you're sure of a big surprise… if you look into your compost today you'll never believe your eyes… for every slow-worm that ever there was, has gathered there on purpose because today's the day the slow-worms have their picnic…(C. Newton 2006)

The slow-worm is an extraordinarily secretive animal. Although allotment holders may be familiar with the slow-worm, biologists know surprisingly little about its ecology. Slow-worms spend most of their lives underground or deep under the vegetation. We are most likely to find them in compost heaps, or when they are warming up under bits of old wood, polythene sheeting or corrugated iron. However, the few animals we see are usually just the tip of the iceberg as most slow-worms are below the surface and rarely observed. In suitable locations slow-worms can occur in considerable numbers, with over 1,000 per hectare recorded in parts of southern England.

As with many other species in Britain, the slow-worm has suffered dramatic declines in recent decades, mainly due to habitat loss and intensive land-use. So the populations remaining in allotments and gardens could be of particular importance to the survival of this species, especially in urban areas. In order to help understand more about slow-worms and their use of compost heaps, The Herpetological Conservation Trust (HCT) and The Amphibian and Reptile Groups UK (ARG UK) are undertaking a national Slow-worm Compost Survey. Forms can be downloaded at http://www.narrs.org.uk/slowwormcompost.htm.

Creature Features

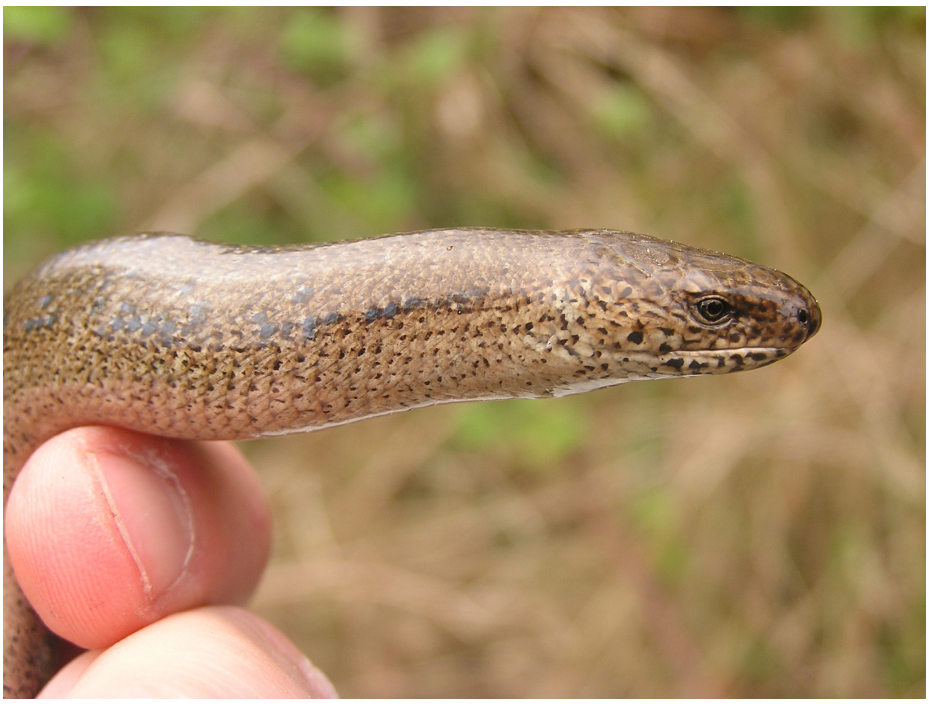
Despite its snake-like appearance, the slow-worm is in fact a legless lizard. Its body is cylindrical and its colour is usually a shiny, metallic grey or brown. Closer inspection reveals differences in coloration and shape between sexes, individuals and animals of different ages.

Female slow-worms tend to have dark flanks and a thin, dark stripe down the back. They also have relatively smaller heads than males. Males tend to be a uniform grey, lacking the longitudinal stripe, and often have a scattering of blue spots. Older slow-worms tend to have a duller appearance and are often battle scarred. Slow-worms give birth to 'live' young. Newly born slow-worms are like miniature versions of adult females, with dark sides and stripe along the back, contrasting with a striking yellow, gold or copper background.

Adult slow-worms can grow up to 50 cm in total length, whereas the newly-born young are 7 to 10 cm long. In common with other species of lizard, the slow-worm is distinguishable from snakes by the visible eyelids (you may see them blink) and the ability to 'shed' its tail.

Free insurance cover for ARGs available for 2007!

Once again, ARG UK has been able to negotiate an insurance package that will cover groups for all the usual activities. The policy has been paid for out of the proceeds from this years HWM, so it will be available to all groups affiliated to ARG UK free of charge. Please ensure that your group plans its activities carefully and completes the necessary risk assessments. If you have any queries please take a look at the information on the ARG UK website at www.arg-uk.org.uk or contact David Orchard at Dorchard@arg-uk.org.uk



Male slow-worm - photo by Chris Gleed-Owen

Shedding the tail is a defence to help escape from predators by providing a distraction. All the bones in the tail (vertebrae) have a plane of weakness in them. When caught by a predator, the slow-worm is able to contract muscles in its tail that break one of the vertebrae in half detaching the tail. The shed tail continues to wriggle and squirm for quite some time and, hopefully, distracts the predator long enough for the slow-worm to escape. The tail does eventually re-grow, but the replacement is never as good as the original and it is easy to spot a re-grown tail.

Distribution and Habitat Preferences

The slow-worm occurs throughout most of Europe, including all of Great Britain, although it tends to be most abundant in the southern counties. Slow-worms are the reptile most commonly reported from urban areas, where they often occur in gardens, parks, allotments and derelict or brownfield land. They need long grass and overgrown areas; therefore they tend to favour unkempt areas of gardens and allotments. Of our native reptiles, the slow-worm seems to be the happiest to live in close proximity to humans, provided its habitat is not disturbed too dramatically.

Although it is difficult for ecologists to study the slow-worm, there are fears that the species may still be in a worrying decline, primarily due to the loss of its semi-natural habitats such as rough grassland, woodland/field edges, hedgerows, heathland, scrub and through intensive agricultural practices. Like all our reptiles, the slow-worm is protected from killing and injury, under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Private Life of the Slow-worm

Slow-worms hibernate throughout the winter months, sometimes sharing hibernation sites with other animals. In spring, males often fight, presumably to see off potential rivals for mates. Even mating itself can be quite aggressive, with amorous males holding females tightly in their jaws. Despite these conflicts slow-worms are harmless and would not bite a person.

A brood of young is produced in September or October. Each baby is born in a transparent membrane, from which it emerges almost immediately. Slow-worms are long-lived: 20 years or more in the wild, and over 50 years recorded in captivity. In urban areas, many older animals tend to have lost their tails, often due to cats.

How Can You Help Conserve Slow-worms

Slow-worms are a welcome component of the compost ecosystem, the king of the food-chain, feeding on pests such as garden slugs, snails and perhaps the New Zealand flatworm. By joining in with the Slow-worm Compost Survey you can help us to understand more about slow-worm ecology and just how important composting is to this secretive animal.

There are a number of organisations helping to conserve slow-worms and other species of reptile and amphibian. Why not join your county Amphibian and Reptile Group, who may be organising conservation tasks in your area, or get involved in the slow-worm compost survey being run by the Herpetological Conservation Trust? A number of county amphibian and reptile groups have even published their own books recording the species present in their county, such as *Amphibians and Reptiles of Surrey* (Julia Wycherley and Richard Anstis, Surrey Wildlife Trust 2001), *Frogs and Friends. The Distribution and Conservation of Amphibians and Reptiles in Nottinghamshire* (Sheila Wright and others, Nottingham Natural History Museum 2004) and *Amphibians and Reptiles of Herefordshire* (Nigel Hand, Phyl King and Will Watson, Herefordshire Biological Records Centre 2006). Publications like these not only provide useful guides to slow-worms and other species, but the profits from book sales also helps to support local conservation projects.

Based on original text from Growing Heap, Spring 2006, Issue No.37, pg 12-13, Journal of The Community Composting Network, www.communitycompost.org

Herpetofauna Workers Meeting, Coventry, 27-28th January 2007

John Poland
South-eastern Regional Representative

During the last weekend in January, nearly 180 amateur and professional herpetologists congregated in Coventry for the annual Herpetofauna Workers Meeting. The event was organised by ARG UK, the umbrella organisation for all county amphibian and reptile groups (ARG's).

The two-day meeting forms an important part of the herp conservationist's social calendar, with delegates travelling from all over Britain and Ireland to attend the event.

Saturday was a day of short informative lectures, superbly presented by knowledgeable speakers. Talks of particular interest (to me at least)

included 'Making Compost Count for Slow-worms' by Gareth Matthes of Surrey ARG and 'Changes in European Protected Species Legislation' by Jim Foster of Natural England. Gareth highlighted the significance of compost heaps (particularly on allotments) as an excellent refuge for slow-worms, whilst Jim's talk made us aware of the forthcoming stricter laws for our scarcer species – will it make a difference to their conservation status? Of course 'Linking Global Warming to Amphibian Declines' by Chris Reading of the recently downsized Centre for Ecology and Hydrology was also a hot topic with the assembled crowd.

Following a splendid evening meal, we enjoyed a presentation by guest speaker Jonathon Houghton on his ground-breaking research on leatherback turtles in UK waters. However, for many, the highlight of the weekend was Jim Foster's hilarious (not to mention downright cheeky!) quiz on the more esoteric aspects of herpetology. Could you make a frog from party balloons, or mime a sand dune?! Additionally, since many herp workers are of a nocturnal disposition, there was also a disco although 'Crocodile Rock' was not on the playlist!

Sunday was a day of interactive workshops on a variety of topics ranging from 'Habitat Suitability Index for Great Crested Newts' to Updating the HGBI Mitigation and Translocation Guidelines'. The great advantage of the workshops is that you can discuss common issues and problems with members of other amphibian and reptile groups (although reaching a consensus is never easy!).

The meeting is greatly enjoyable and of interest to herpetologists of all levels of experience, not just for experts. So, look out for the HWM 2008.

This article originally appeared in the Hampshire ARG newsletter.

What's your ARG doing this survey season?

Have you had any interesting findings or experiences while looking for herps this spring? If so why not inspire others by sending in an article for the autmn edition of *ARG today*?

Coventry raises funds for cobras

Jim Foster, Natural England

The "Have I got newts for you?" quiz at this year's Herpetofauna Workers' Meeting in Coventry raised almost £290 for king cobra conservation in southern India. A collection was held during the quiz and delegates were kind enough to donate to this deserving cause.

The project was set up two years ago by Romulus Whitaker, who has years of experience in herp conservation in India. It involves a number of activities using the magnificent king cobra as a flagship for rainforest conservation. The project funds a conservation officer, who amongst other things gives talks to schools, encouraging people to view snakes more favourably. Research will be initiated into how the snakes use the forest and surrounding land. King cobra nests are monitored and landowners are encouraged to protect them. There has been a noticeable shift in attitudes during the project. The project aims to help protect the king cobra's vanishing habitat, and ensure that people can peacefully coexist with the snakes. Many thanks to everyone who donated.

Since the project's research station was set up two years ago, it has been used as a base for a number of studies ranging from mushrooms and butterflies to king cobras. It also has an active conservation education program that includes field trips for high school children from cities and local schools and the Conservation Officer, Gowri Shankar, gives talks to schools, women's self-help groups, village adminstrative body meetings on rainforest conservation.

Over the last couple of years, king cobra nests that have been abandoned by the mother are monitored (temperature and humidity recorded) and protected by the land-owners - this has seen a perceptable change in attitudes. From wanting to get rid of the eggs, the land-owners begin to develop a sensitivity to the continued existence of large dangerous animals in their plantations and agricultural fields during the two month long process of nurturing the nests. As more and more researchers begin to use the base, we also hope to involve the local communities in the conservation movement.

A call for conservationists to work together across Europe!

Daniel Piec, Natura International and Froglife

There has never been a better time for collaboration between nature conservation organisations in Europe, not least because the geographical area of the European Union has enlarged to include one of the most biodiversity rich areas on the continent. Personally, I think we live in the most interesting and challenging times for conservation ever. The conservation movement has grown tremendously for the last ten years and so has ordinary peoples' awareness and appreciation of the natural environment and the threats that face it.

As a young conservationist I often ask myself this question: what shall I focus on to have the greatest impact on protecting the natural environment within my sphere of influence and expertise? Well, being Polish I have a natural tendency to socialise! I think that perhaps this was one of the drivers that inspired my wife, Dr Britt Cordi, and I to establish Natura International (the grand name matches our ambitions) – a charity that brings together and catalyses the best conservation practices across Europe (quite often through socialising!).

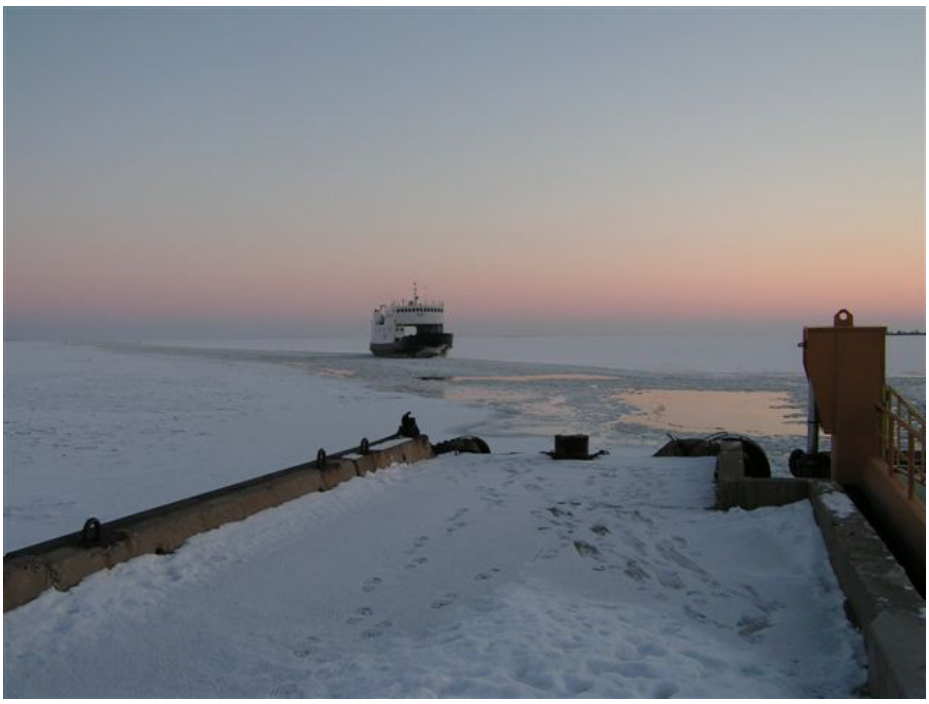
Our conservation approach rests on three pillars:

We undertake practical conservation initiatives by applying innovative and sound solutions to sustain the richness and integrity of habitats and species,

We educate and involve people in conservation to foster their sense of responsibility and respect for the natural environment and a desire to take part in safeguarding and enhancing it,

We conduct high quality ecological research and surveys to share and increase knowledge about nature conservation.

The current target region of Natura International is Eastern Europe as this is where there is still a rich biodiversity and functioning ecosystem to save. Natura International is a generator of conservation solutions that build on the expertise of many people. For example, could we work together with our Ukrainian colleagues to develop wetland monitoring programmes, with amphibians being a part of the model,



A ferry cracking its way through the ice at -22°C. Estonians can find it difficult to believe in climate change! - photo by Daniel Piec

by developing a network of experts and volunteers in Ukraine? This is only one of many ideas we are currently working on.

Or what about conservation of Estonian coastal meadows in this time of climate change? Imagine what would happen to 10 000 ha of flat coastal meadows with even with a slight increase in sea level. Estonians really worry about their natterjack toad population and what might happen when the climate changes (despite the -22 degrees Celsius I experienced in Estonia this month!). It is now important that we address climate change and its likely impacts in management plans for our local reserves, not least through long-term planning, but also through applying a whole ecosystem approach.

On a different but connected issue, I would also like to pay tribute to those conservationists who work with planners in maintaining habitat connectivity. Working with planners in Eastern European countries has not yet been recognised as a priority (apart from where there is a local conflict). Natura International has an ambition to pioneer this work in this region with the help of our British colleagues.

I value the conservation knowledge of British ecologists and I think they benefit from the large, enthusiastic amateur movement. If we manage to pass this knowledge to other countries, they might be able to avoid making the same mistakes and save years wasting valuable resources. But what about information flowing the opposite way? What can we learn from our colleagues in Eastern Europe who, through the past decades, have developed different approaches to nature conservation? Well perhaps you could find out at our workshop on European Funding for Nature Conservation, which we are organising together with Eurosite and Natural England in Kampinoski National Park (Poland) in April. Or perhaps you would like to become a volunteer on one of our projects, or become one of our associated advisors or perhaps you know somebody from Eastern Europe who desperately needs some help to implement a grand idea? We will be more than happy to talk with you about this or other ideas you might have. Please see our website for further information www.natura-international.org

For further details please contact daniel.piec@natura-international.org

Monitoring toad populations

Jan Clemons,
Chair of ARG UK and Warwickshire ARG

Scientific investigation of the causes of the amphibian global decline phenomenon has revealed that many factors are involved, including climate change. The disappearance of the golden toad, one of the most infamous examples of the phenomenon, is now thought to have been driven by climate change affecting the humidity of this species' cloud forest habitat.

Closer to home, Dr Chris Reading has been studying a common toad population in Dorset for over 20 years and has come to the conclusion that there is also a link between population decline and climate change, as he explained at the Herpetofauna Workers' Meeting.

Long-term studies are vitally important in understanding trends in amphibian populations, and Amphibian and Reptile Groups may be well-placed to contribute towards this goal. For example Warwickshire Amphibian & Reptile Team (WART) has been involved in monitoring a common toad population at Dunchurch Management College, near Rugby in Warwickshire for over15 years which has generated some useful data using a simple survey methodology.

As soon as the toads arrive, nightly two-hour visits are made until toad numbers peak and then fall. We count only toads in the pond and record numbers of males and females. Simple abiotic data such as air and water temperature, water pH and oxygen levels are also measured.

In 1999, I wrote an article for Froglog, the newsletter of the Declining Amphibian Populations Task Force reporting the dramatic decline in this toad population over nine years. At the time the cause was believed to have been low oxygen levels possibly caused by a leakage of slurry. This was rectified but the management college closed in 2000 and monitoring access was not possible as the college underwent a complete refurbishment.

During this interim period several colleagues insisted that the study should continue but it was not until 2005 that contact with the new owners was made and we were able to access the pond again over a period of nights. During 2005 and 2006 the size of the population was small but relatively stable. The ratio of males to females remained at the pre - 1999 levels of approximately 4 : 1.

Oxygen levels had risen from a 40% low in 1999 to a more healthy 70%.

As a consequence the toad census will remain an annual event in the WART calendar to see if the population remains extant and if it can recover over time.

From an ARG UK perspective it would be good to see other groups carrying out common toad population counts in order to collect useful quantitative data from all over the UK. As long as you stick to the same methodology the results are comparable from year to year and such simple studies would be invaluable to monitor long-term trends.

References

Clemons J (1999), Changes in a common toad population over 10 years. Froglog, number 35. http://www.open.ac.uk/daptf/froglog/

The ARG Today Interview

The Editor interviews John Baker

John Baker during the survey season

Many of those involved with amphibian and reptile conservation will be familiar with the name of John Baker, who among other things is now the secretary of ARG UK. John has a wealth of experience that's helped the ARG network develop over the years. Not one to sing his own praises, ARG today tries to find out a bit more about John and his contribution to herp conservation in Britain.

When did you first become interested in herpetofauna?

I am one of those people who has been fascinated with amphibians and reptiles since childhood. I was interested in wildlife in general, but for some reason I was always drawn most strongly to amphibians and reptiles. I grew up in the West Midlands, where, although reptiles were relatively scarce, you could still find and catch amphibians fairly easily, and get a good close look at them. And I suppose that part of the attraction of amphibians and reptiles to me is purely aesthetic. Even superficially drab species are often beautifully marked animals, if you take a close look.

How did you become professionally involved in herpetology?

Working in herpetology didn't feature within the scope of careers advice available when I was at school. I went to University simply because that was what my peers were doing. As an undergraduate I studied animal behaviour – which I loved, even though there was little reference to amphibians and reptiles. At one point I went to a conference in Wales (organised by Richard Griffiths, if I remember rightly) with a theme of herpetological research and conservation, where it occurred to me that one way to work with herps was through research. So, I grabbed an opportunity to work at the Open University, with Tim Halliday, who specialised in amphibian breeding behaviour.

What sort of research work did you do?

One of the things that we did was to look at amphibian colonisation of newly created farm ponds. I went to the First World Conference of Herpetology, which was held at the University of Kent in 1989. The presentation that made the biggest impact on me was given by Per Sjőgren, talking about the metapopulation ecology of pool frogs. By a quirk of fate, this work is still of great interest today – because the pool frogs studied by Per Sjőgren are northern clade pool frogs, which are currently being reintroduced to England. However, at the time the work was interesting to me because it was the first time that I had heard of metapopulation ecology. It might sound strange to think about now, but prior to a general understanding of metapopulation ecology, most amphibian ecologists worked on their 'study pond', not considering the fact that what is going on (or not going on) in neighbouring ponds has a huge influence on 'their population'.

This was one of the things that stimulated my interest in newly created farm ponds. Farmland habitat is a huge chunk of our land mass, and it is also where amphibian populations have declined most dramatically over the last half of the last century. I was keen to find out what sort of factors made a new pond attractive to amphibians, and in particular I wanted to look at the effect of neighbouring ponds on pond colonisation. For frogs and toads existing populations were not much of an issue, because these species were able to colonise new ponds up to a km from existing populations. And, where we were working (Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire) there was usually a frog or toad population within one km of almost anywhere you might put in a new pond. The situation for newts was different, though, as their colonisation distance was only 400 m. In other words, if you wanted newts to colonise a new pond, then it had to be within 400 m of an existing newt pond. Newts have been found to move greater distances than this from breeding ponds, but in our study area 400 m was the maximum interpond distance they seemed to be able to deal with.

What have been your other experiences of herpetology?

Conservation has always been the most important aspect of herpetology to me, but I have built up a wide experience of herps work in a variety of areas. I have worked for the Declining Amphibian Populations Task Force in an administrative capacity. In a voluntary role I put in some time with the British Herpetological Society's Education Committee, with Jan Clemons, who is now, of course, ARG UK's chair. I have worked for Froglife. I have also worked in consultancy, which has been a useful experience. I am now delighted to be working with The HCT.

How did you become involved with ARG UK?

In part through work at Froglife but also through working with my local group, Suffolk ARG. When I worked as the conservation officer at Froglife one of the most important things I did was to support the ARG network – or the HGBI, as it was then. We used to provide secretarial support, we supported newly established groups in setting up and we organised the Herp Workers' Meetings. Working at Froglife also introduced me

to the Suffolk ARG, which has given me a good insight into the workings of a local group. I am now the Regional Rep for East Anglia.

What are the most significant changes you have seen over your time with HGBI/ARG UK?

Two things stand out. The first, which really started prior to my involvement with ARG UK, has been the expansion of the wildlife consultancy sector. When the HGBI started it was a network of volunteers. Now many good volunteers have moved into wildlife consultancy, and consultancy has become a common career choice for younger generations of herp workers. So, although ARG UK is still, ostensibly, a voluntary network, I would guess that professional consultants, giving their time and money, are now a significant factor in its current success. I think that we have to recognise this fact in the future development of ARG UK.

The second change has been the resurgence of activity generated from within ARG UK itself. Within the last couple of years ARG UK has seen developments including an insurance scheme, this newsletter, a web site and the first of its own advisory publications.

What do you see are the challenges for ARG UK?

Our primary challenge is finding the funding for a support post. ARG UK is an efficient network that benefits from the support of volunteers, consultants, The HCT and the statutory nature conservation bodies. However, we really need a funded post, or even a part-time post, to shoulder the administrative burden and to make the network even more effective.

A further challenge is to improve collaborative working within UK herps conservation. We're dealing with only twelve or thirteen native terrestrial herps and yet we have a plethora of organisations working on their conservation, to a greater or lesser extent – separate national agencies, BHS, HCT, Froglife and ARG UK. On the positive side, we're fortunate that most of these bodies are represented by cooperative individuals and collaborative working is the norm. A good example of this is the NARRS project. However, there are still some gaps in collaboration – which surely cannot benefit herps conservation. So, there's still a way to go.

In search of the Jersey grass snake

Jon Cranfield

I joined Todd Lewis (Dorset Amphibian and Reptile Network) on a field trip to the Channel Island of Jersey (21st to 25th September 2006) to track down grass snakes. The grass snake is reported to be the rarest reptile on Jersey. The other species include green lizards, wall lizards and slow-worms and we hoped that our survey would also find these species.

We met up with Nina Cornish and Mike Freeman from the States of Jersey Environment Department on the first day. We discussed how we would go about finding the grass snake and, due to time constraints, decided that visual encounter surveys would be the best method.

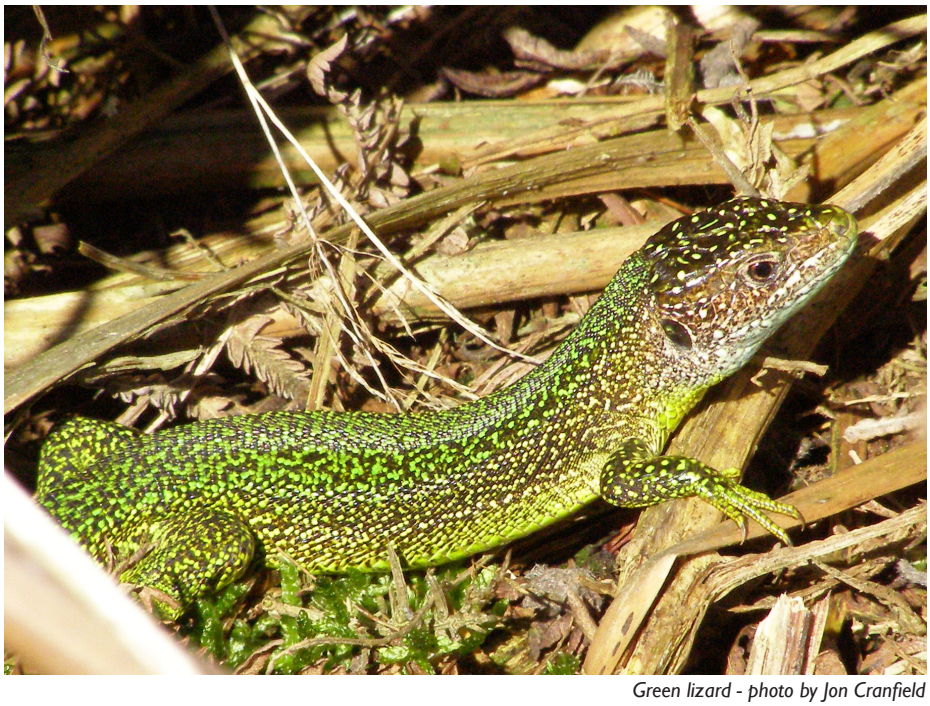
After reviewing previous survey information and making a successful application for a survey licence we were ready to find our first grass snakes of the trip.

On the second day Nina arranged for us to meet Tim Liddard, the warden of Ouaisné Common and a prime site for grass snakes. Tim guided us around the reserve, pointing out the various habitats which included old sand dune slacks, heath land, scrub/gorse, and *Molinia* grassland (a rare habitat in Jersey).

The reserve is home to the only natural breeding colony of the agile frog and every year tadpoles grown on at Jersey Zoo are released within the dune slack ponds. Occasionally a grass snake is spotted during this tadpole release period, possibly attracted by the ready meals swimming around the dune slacks.

Ouaisné Common, a prime site for grass snakes - photo by Jon Cranfield

At around 2pm we found our first grass snake, a hatchling, at the edge of a gorse bush. This was near one of the habitat piles which are created routinely by the reserve management team . We visited various places on the Island with some wonderful names, my favourite being Creepy Valley, part of Les Blanches Banques. In this area we found plenty of green lizards, a few slow-worms but no grass snakes. Judging by the habitats at Creepy Valley we felt that another visit in the spring/early summer would be worthwhile to locate snakes.



Green lizard - photo by Jon Cranfield

Our next encounter with a grass snake was on day four after visiting the Herpetology Department at Durrell Zoo. We were given a tip off where grass snakes were highly likely to be found. We visited the site, a large area of sand dunes called the Les Blanches Banques, and within 10 minutes we found an adult male grass snake making a dash for a nearby rabbit burrow within the dune we were walking over.

We managed to get photographs of the two snakes and we weighed and measured them both. When we returned to the Environment Department we learned that Tim had spotted another adult grass snake at Ouaisné Common, near the main breeding slacks for the agile frog.

So over the four - day trip three grass snakes were found along with good sightings of green lizards, wall lizards and slow-worms, basking within woodland. This means that we managed to find all the reptile species of Jersey.

In 2007 I am planning a return visit to find the amphibians of Jersey including the agile frog, common toad and palmate newt. Further surveys are also planned for reptiles on the Island with the help of Jersey State Department and ARG UK members in the Channel Islands

For more information on Jersey reptiles and amphibians please contact Nina Cornish at n.cornish@gov.je ; 01534 441600

If anyone would like to come along to the next field trip then please get in contact – Jon Cranfield Jcranfield@arg-uk.org.uk ; 07769 644354

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Nina Cornish, Mike Freeman and Tim Liddard for their help, advice and hospitality while we were staying on Jersey and we hope to see you soon in 2007.

Mapping the Adder in the Peak District National Park

Chris Monk, Derbyshire ARG.

The launch of the "Make the Adder Count" survey in 2005 prompted a concentrated programme of work over the past two years to map the current distribution of the adder in its Derbyshire stronghold in the Peak District National Park. The last surveys had been done by the National Park rangers in 1994 and 1995 but concentrated on one small area. In 1997 the audit for the Peak District BAP and also the publication of the Derbyshire Red Data book both stated that adders were very restricted and only found in three one-kilometre grid squares. However, that year also saw the publication of the Sorby Society's atlas of the reptiles and amphibians of its area, which showed records from thirteen squares.

From a small start with just three people recording in 2005, a training day was organised for Derbyshire ARG in 2006 which was well supported despite dreadful weather on the day. All but one of those on the training day took part in the "Make the Adder Count" 2006 survey, contributing many observations and finding new locations. Around 29 adder hibernation sites have now been identified, ranging from scattered individuals spaced out along stream valleys to communal sites with over a dozen snakes basking.

We now have recent records from twenty-four one-kilometre grid squares in this main adder population centre and have produced reports for the National Park in both years. The National Park ecologists and land managers have been made aware that the adder is widely spread across both the large areas of moorland that they own and manage, so that its requirements can be taken into consideration. Our surveys have shown that in several areas bracken banks are preferred to heather as adder hibernation sites, so that they should also be protected in the various moorland restoration projects underway in the area.

One of the Peak District adders - photo by Sue Robinson

Mátra Wildlife Tours

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Our tours are led by an English local guide, and are tailor-made to reflect the interests of individual guests. Although nature is our speciality, we can also offer tours of local castles, churches and wine cellars, plus historic towns and villages. According to season, we can also offer skiing and gliding opportunities, and a chance to relax in a thermal bath. Our wildlife tours are usually staged for small groups of up to 4 guests, but if a larger group wished to visit, we'd be only too happy to quote.

Hungary is a wonderful country for flora and fauna, rewarding the birder with species such as the Roller and Bee-eater, and the entomologist with the Stag Beetle, Praying Mantis, and around 160 species of butterfly. The herpetologist will delight in observing species such as the Green Lizard, Wall Lizard, Dice Snake, Aesculapian Snake, Green Toad, Yellow-bellied Toad, Agile Frog, Green Tree Frog, and European Pond Turtle.

To see pictures of our local area, and some of the species that live here, please visit our web site: www.matrawildlife.com

For more specific details and our tariff for 2007, please contact us on: info@matrawildlife.com

In addition, we are now following up other adder sightings away from the main population stronghold to see if we can map the current distribution across the whole National Park. With some recent records from areas with no history of adders and the sightings of snakes in areas where they were last recorded 30 years ago we are hopeful of further advances this year. Contact has also been made with the National Trust and Severn Trent Water ranger staff to exchange information and with several local farmers and graziers who have reported sightings. A further survey and training day has been organised for 2007 and we are hoping for better weather than the rain and dense hill-fog that dominated last year's event. As the area is close to Sheffield, the South Yorkshire ARG is also organising a reptile training day up there this spring. Already in early February, some recorders from both Derbyshire and South Yorkshire have been out trying (and succeeding) to find the first male adder to show himself this year.

Scientific Paper Review

Trevor Beebee
Professor, Sussex University

Amphibians

Pounds, J.A. et al. (2006) Widespread amphibian extinctions from epidemic disease driven by global warming. Nature 439, 161-167.

A landmark paper, suggesting that the dramatic recent amphibian declines and extinctions in Central and South America were driven by a changing climate at the intermediate altitudes where most of the problems have arisen. Higher minimum and average temperatures, but more cloud and lower maximum temperatures, favour chytrid fungus (the proximal cause of death) and disadvantage the amphibian hosts, leading to mass mortalities. This suggests the fungus has always been around. Influential, but still controversial (see below).

Rachowicz, L. J. et al. (2006) Emerging infectious disease as a proximate cause of amphibian mass mortality. Ecology 87, 1671-1683

In contrast to the above paper, this study on *Rana muscosa* in north America suggested that population declines were caused by chytrid fungus, but not as a result of recent climate change. The results supported a second hypothesis, notably that the chytrid is a "novel pathogen", maybe a recent mutation or more likely a pathogen previously found only in a confined area (maybe South Africa) and subsequently spread as a result of human activities. Which of these papers is closest to the truth remains to be seen.

Ahola, M. et al. (2006) Alien mink predation induces prolonged decline in archipelago amphibians. Proceedings of the Royal Society of London series B 273, 1261-1265.

This study in Finnish islands demonstrated, essentially by removal of introduced north American mink, that common frogs were seriously affected by the alien predator. Frog numbers increased dramatically following mink eradication. By contrast, common toads were unaffected, presumably on account of their skin toxins rendering them unpalatable. Perhaps mink have affected frogs elsewhere, including Britain.

Denoel, M. & Lehmann, A. (2006) Multi-scale effect of landscape processes and habitat quality on newt abundance: implications for conservation. Biological Conservation 130, 495-504.

This study of palmate newts in 130 ponds in southern France showed that populations were affected at three levels of scale: firstly, pond quality itself was important, with relatively deep, well-vegetated ponds devoid of fish being the best; secondly, terrestrial habitat was optimized by the presence of woodland; and thirdly, high densities of occupied ponds at the larger landscape scale also had a positive influence. This work emphasized the complexity of understanding all the factors that contribute to supporting healthy amphibian populations.

Rowe, G., Harris, J.D. & Beebee, T.J.C. (2006) Lusitania revisited: a phylogeographic analysis of the natterjack toad *Bufo calamita* across its entire biogeographical range. Molecular Phylogenetics and Evolution 39, 335-346.

In this paper, molecular genetic methods were used to investigate how natterjacks colonised the south-west corner of Ireland. The data ruled out human introduction (ancient or recent), and also natural invasion via England after the last ice age. The results suggested that a local refuge near southern Ireland (then dry land) supported natterjacks through the last, brief cold spell about 10,000 years ago, from which they colonized both southern Ireland and northwest England. Natterjacks in southern England must have entered by a completely different route.

Reptiles

Hofmann, S. & Henle, K. (2006) Male reproductive success and intrasexual selection in the common lizard determined by DNA-microsatellites. Journal of Herpetology 40, 1-6.

This study investigated paternity in a wild common lizard population using DNA fingerprinting techniques. Virtually two thirds of all clutches had multiple paternity. The most successful males (i.e. those fathering the most offspring) were the largest and heaviest, and had the longest tails. There was no evidence, however, that head width was a factor in male reproductive success (as has been shown for some other lizard species). It is not clear whether the most successful males were simply the best fighters, or whether they were the most efficient at searching out females. The former seems most likely.

Chamaille-Jammes, S., Massot, M., Aragon, P. & Clobert, J. (2006) Global warming and positive fitness response in mountain populations of common lizards *Lacerta vivipara*. Global Change Biology 12, 392-402.

In southern France, common lizards are on the southerly edge of their range and live in mountainous districts. Perhaps surprisingly, this study found that over the past 18 years increasing temperatures in the mountains have correlated with increased body size in all age classes. One-year-old animals increased by an average of 28% (snout-vent length). Presumably because of increased female body size, clutch size also increased and so did adult survival. On the face of it, global warming is benefiting common lizards in the area where we might expect the opposite result. It remains to be seen whether these positive effects continue as the mountain habitat structures also respond to the warming process.

Ciesiolkiewicz, J., Orlowski, G. & Elanowski, A. (2006) High juvenile mortality of grass snakes *Natrix natrix* (L.) on a suburban road. Polish Journal of Ecology 54, 465-472.

This rather depressing work on less than 2 km of roads near the Polish city of Wroclaw registered 190 grass snake road kills in two years. This averaged more than one snake per km per day during the summer months. There were two peaks of mortality, one in late May-early June and the other at the beginning of August. About 90% of the victims were juveniles less than 30 cm in total length, and about 30% were hatchlings. Peak kill times also correlated with the warmest temperatures in the "cool" study year of 2004, but not in the "hot" year (2003). It seems possible that road traffic might be having a significant impact on snake population dynamics in this area.

Karlson-Stiber, C., Salmonson, H. & Persson, H. (2006) A nationwide study of *Vipera berus* bites during one year – epidemiology and morbidity of 231 cases. Clinical Toxicology 44, 25-30.

This Swedish study compared adder bites in 1995 with those in the same human population previously recorded in 1975. Children less than 10 years old were bitten more often than expected by chance, and so were males relative to females. Only 13% of cases led to severe effects, though these could include heart attacks. No fatalities occurred. In general, the patterns were similar in 1975 and 1995, but the clinical effects were less severe in 1995. This was attributed to the introduction of better antivenoms.

Ursenbacher, S., Carlsson, M., Helfer, V., Tegelstrom, H. & Fumagalli, L. (2006) Phylogeography and Pleistocene refugia of the adder (*Vipera berus*) as inferred from mitochondrial DNA sequence data. Molecular Ecology 15, 3425-3437.

This work looked at mitochondrial DNA sequences (control region and cytochrome b) from 80 adders sampled at 60 localities across the snake's European range, from Britain in the west to Scandinavia, Russia and the Balkans in the east. The results suggest that three main lineages of adders exist, resulting from Italian, Balkan and northern (Carpathian mountain) ice age refuges. Adders in northern Europe today are all of the "northern clade" lineage that probably spread initially from the Carparthian region about 1 million years ago. This clade was fragmented by later cold periods into three subclades; one in the south of France, which in the most recent warming colonised northern France; one in southern Germany, which colonised much of north-central Europe including Britain and Scandinavia; and one in the Ukraine, which colonised north-east Europe (including Finland).

100 years on and they're still going "peep"!

Helen Muir-Howie
Bedfordshire County Recorder for Reptiles and Amphibians

In 2006 the Bedfordshire Natural History Society (BNHS) is celebrating its 60th anniversary. In the same year another group in Bedfordshire reached the centenary of its foundation.

I am referring to the Midwife Toad *Alytes obstetricans* colony whose founder members arrived as stowaways in a shipment of plants from France. The plants were delivered to a nursery in Ashburnham Road, Bedford where the toads began their colonisation. As the colony grew two young brothers, Robert and Percy Brocklehurst, asked if they could have some of the toads for their garden. They were allowed to collect some and these were released into their garden in Bromham Road and so began their spread. No-one knows the exact date of their arrival, but when I asked Percy Brocklehurst if he could give me some idea of when he thought they had come here he was fairly certain it was 1906 and that they started their colony in 1908.

Many people have introduced midwife toads into their gardens over years and they are now very widespread across the north of Bedford. They are also in many local villages.

Robert Brocklehurst later started colonies in Worksop and Oundle and it is thought these still exist today. There have also been reports of their calls being heard in other parts of the country too.

The BNHS ran several surveys in 2006 and one of these is The Midwife Toad Survey. Most records are based on calls, as the toads themselves are very difficult to find. Occasional peeps can be heard at any time of the year but they don't really get started properly until the weather starts to warm up. This varies from year to year but is usually in April. They reach their peak during the months of June, July and August but can still be heard from time to time until the frosts start in October. They don't usually start calling until after 8 o'clock at night.

The call is a very difficult sound to describe; it is not like the croak made by frogs or our native toads, but is more like an electronic bleep. The sound carries quite well, enabling you to survey for these toads by walking along a road

Midwife toad - photo by John Baker

and listening out for the calls coming from gardens.

The toads themselves are tiny creatures being around the size of a 50p coin when fully grown. They are nocturnal and live in burrows concealed under rocks.

Whilst the survey focussed on Bedfordshire I am also interested to find out their distribution nationally, so keep listening for them if you are out and about anywhere in the country this summer.

I look forward to seeing the results of this survey.

New ARG for Bucks

Tony Marshall
Buckinghamshire ARG

The inaugural meeting of Bucks ARG was held on 1 February in Great Missenden. Twenty people attended to hear John Baker talk about the national context. About forty people in the county are already signed up as interested members. These all responded to news that a group was being set up, advertised through the existing county Recorders network, the local Wildlife Trust, the Chiltern Society and local conservation groups. Stimulus for the group came from the currently woeful state of herp records in the county records centre, which hugely under-represent the actual distribution. People were just not reporting what they had seen and already the group is making a difference to that.

The Buckinghamshire ARG inaugural meeting - photo by Tony Marshall

We have chosen to go for a "flat" network-type organisation, at least initially, and are about to organise training, a group licence, field events, a regional structure, and a website. Information from ARG UK is invaluable and this will be circulated to everyone via e-mail. We shall be encouraging participation in national projects and more systematic surveys of potential sites.

The initial organisers were Tony and Val Marshall, since joined by Chris Bartlett to share their work and cover for absences. The organisers are all active members of the local conservation group Prestwood Nature, and already contribute records on many other species groups – butterflies, plants, insects, fungi etc, as well as carrying out surveys of ponds and other wildlife sites. They do not yet have any special expertise in reptiles and amphibians, but are keen to learn! Tony and Val met many members of other county ARGs at the recent Herpetofauna Workers Annual Meeting, which provided essential background for their new job and plenty of inspiration too. Thanks to everyone involved at ARG UK for their keen support.

Group contacts are Tony Marshall ecorocker@gmail.com and Val Marshall valmarshall@waitrose.com

The HCT and BHS Scientific Conference

Natalie Walker

The Herpetological Conservation Trust and British Herpetological Society Joint Scientific Meeting took place in Bournemouth on 16th December 2006. The event proved successful with 95 attendees from professional organisations, governmental bodies, academia, consultants, zoo staff, HCT, BHS and of course ARG members.

Ten talks were presented at the meeting, which ranged from understanding the genetics of disease resistance in the common frog to mapping great crested newt habitat in North Wales.

Speakers included the following:

Dr Inga Zeisset from the University of Sussex, spoke about the genetic mapping of the common frog with five English and one French sample and focussing on areas within the genetic make-up which appear to provide resistance against fungal infections for this species.

Dr Barry Hill from the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS), based in Weymouth, discussed the evidence for Ranavirus and its implication in amphibian mortalities. (Ranaviruses are a specific group - genus - of viruses within the Iridoviridae family, that can cause mass deaths in amphibians and reptiles). He was very charismatic and enthusiastic speaker with much experience in fish viral diseases, but through his work had discovered evidence of recognised amphibian diseases (e.g. Ranavirus) in fish species. His studies and interests led him to badgering the European Commission to fund a three - year study of the potential routes of infection of these relatively new diseases – to aid determination of whether international trade in fish or amphibians transfer these diseases to wild populations of amphibians and reptiles. He also requested help from herpetologists including ARG members. In the event of a mass mortality caused by *Ranavirus*, he wants a single, frozen specimen to help with his research. Barry Hill can be contacted at CEFAS on 01305 206 626.

Dr Chris Reading, Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH) gave a summary of his 20 - year study of the common toad population in his garden linking it to global warming and the amphibian decline. His studies showed how reduced breeding condition of female toads (through smaller body size, poorer body condition and lowered survival) occurred as a result of warmer winters. Milder winters have resulted in females leaving hibernation with lower body condition and these individuals tend to reach sexual maturity at a smaller size and younger age.

Dr Tony Gent, of The Herpetological Conservation Trust (HCT), discussed the 'Add an Adder' programme. This has been successful in identifying sites where adders have been present. Data will be passed to the ARG groups to check and validate records. If you haven't already visited the website then access it via www.adder.org.uk

Dr Richard Griffiths, from DICE, University of Kent, explained research on the subject of 'a comparison of tins and felt and their associated microclimates as artificial refugia for reptiles and how effective they are as a survey method. Dr Griffiths and his students collected data on the species found under the

mats/tins, measured size and body mass, refuge temperatures every 30 minutes and the relative humidity under the tins. Preliminary results for slow-worm show a preference for tins over felt…for some of the time!!! Adder avoid felt and at one site also avoided tin!!! Refuge preference was not related to the variables measured but was more related to the site studied, the season and the refuge location. In general the counts of reptiles under refugia may have a very poor relationship with the actual populations present. However, he did mention there is much more work still to be done!

John Baker, of HCT, then explained 'sampling design for the National Amphibian and Reptile Recording Scheme'. This talk identified its aim of not just being a recording scheme, but a way of assessing the conservation status of our native herpetofauna. Many of you will already be aware of or be helping with this recording scheme, but if you wish to help with surveys or are interested follow the link www.narrs.org.uk to find out more.

Professor Trevor Beebee presented evidence regarding the origins of the natterjack toad in Ireland and its connections with Lusitania (historical province including all of Portugal and much of western Spain). Analysis of 22 natterjack toad DNA samples spread across its range show the 'tree of relationships or hierarchy' for this species has five distinct taxonomic groups or clades. Only one of these is found within northern Europe, the other four occur in southern Europe. Professor Beebee's research showed that a population of this species must have survived north of the Pyrenees during the last ice age (14,000 years ago) and that the species also survived in a pocket of Southern Ireland during a period of time known as the big freeze or Younger Dryas (12,700 years ago) when North America, Europe and Western Asia were subject to a prolonged period of freezing conditions.

Dr Chris Gleed-Owen (HCT) and **Amy Eycott** of Forest Research, Farnham, gave a talk on the mapping of great crested newt habitats to help the Countryside Council for Wales assess the status of this species in North Wales. The system is being developed on a Geographical Information System (GIS) and used to target the best use of conservation resources to reconnect the most valuable habitats for this species. Connected areas of habitat were measured by Chris and Amy in terms of permeability to this newt species, related to the terrain of the habitats between current and potential future breeding areas.

Dr Eddie Brede from the Max-Plank-Institute, Germany, focused on a comparison of population structure and genetic diversity between common toad and common frog. The common frog was found to have a greater genetic diversity, which should mean it has larger populations but this is not so. Common toad tend to return to the same breeding sites forming large aggregations year after year which result in low levels of gene flow. Common frog spawn in many different locations and often in new locations as they arise, across smaller but overlapping communities allowing greater genetic exchange.

The talks were received well and left the audience aware of and informed of recent scientific studies within the herpetological world and generated a lot of interesting discussions. This event is held every year in December and is a very good way to meet, talk to and mingle with like-minded folk and some very important herpetologists (VIH)! So, if you haven't yet been to one of these meetings – it may well be about time you did!

Gulley pots and Great crested newts

Stephen Lowe
Bridgend and Vale of Glamorgan ARG

I did my first licensed "official" great crested newt survey in 2004 and was lucky to strike gold first time. A pond full of great crested newts but with a sting in the tail. The pond had been surrounded on three sides by a road leading through a modern housing estate and on this road were the usual gulley pots, most of them leading into closed soakaway systems. Remembering some of my favourite childhood places to find trapped animals, I had to have a look and of course found great crested newt - lots of them.

How do newts get into the gulley pots? The kerb acts as a drift fence and down they go, into the pitfalls. Most fall during migrations in summer and autumn, when they have to scale the kerb with the drains against it. After falling into the gulley pots, depending on the amount of water in them, great crested newts will either remain there or climb into the overflow pipe and fall into the soakaway chamber. This chamber consists of a 2m deep concrete sectional pipe which is placed on a bed of hardcore. In the sides of the chamber are drainage holes leading into the surrounding hardcore. If newts are not recovered from the soakaways, they will crawl into the surrounding hardcore and either starve or drown after the next period of heavy rain. A lot of 2004 to 2006 was spent trying to prevent that.

Many more newts fell into the drain system than I rescued. I had one attempt at sifting through gulley pot sediment to find out how many newts had died before I could rescue them. This was not a pleasant experience and I decided that I could live without the information! I managed to recover 328 great crested newts in 2004 and 318 in 2005. By then I had a fair idea of the scale of the problem and set about finding a solution. With the help of the Highways Department in the Vale of Glamorgan, various schemes such as ladders, ramps and tunnels were investigated and dismissed.

One idea was to place a metal strip across the back of the drain to form a "newt bridge". This could not be made to work, but led to the final design. The gulley pot covers were simply moved 10cm away from the kerb edge and the gap filled with concrete. This avoided touching the drain system and still collected the rainfall. What's more, it seems to work. In 2006, only 65 newts were found in the system, an 80% reduction. I will be making a monthly check of the drains this season to ensure it wasn't a freak result, but as the pond counts were normal and great crested newts were seen to walk along the kerb edge over the concrete strips to the nearest dropped kerb, I am fairly certain it is a true reduction. I wouldn't advocate building new gulley pots like this, but if anyone finds a similar "historical" problem, then this solution may be useful.

If anyone wants the full report or further information, contact me at bridgendandvaleamphibians@yahoo.co.uk

The Toad Patrol – New Alresford & Avington Hampshire

Jon Cranfield,
Toad Patrol Co-ordinator for Hampshire

I have recently moved to New Alresford near Winchester and I noticed that a toad crossing was registered in this town last winter. I really wanted to get involved with this activity and so I went about contacting the previous toad patroller.

The toad patrols in Alresford (Drove Lane) and Avington (Avington Park) were first registered in 1997 by Natalie Carpenter. Many thousands of toads were rescued from the roads normally at night on warm wet evenings.

I contacted Natalie again after Chirstmas and she showed me around the two sites and so I was all set to start my own toad patrol with local volunteers. Natalie had recently found it difficult to attend to the spring evenings over the last few years due to commitments overseas and she welcomed my interest and has been very helpful in providing details of local people who are willing to help with the toad patrol.

As people may be aware the toad crossing site is registered through Froglife's Toads on Roads Scheme with local people taking on quite a large task of maintaining a watchful eye over the two sites to determine when the toads will be moving.

I posted an advert on the Hampshire Wildlife Trust Species Group's web forum and also on RAUK. Several responses were from local volunteers who were willing to help with the toad patrol. A meet up was arranged at my local pub the Horse and Groom where Cressida, Mark and myself met up to go over the ARG UK insurance scheme so that people would be covered to undertake the Toad Patrol – an ARG activity. Currently ARG UK provides free insurance so any volunteer who comes to help with the toad patrol is covered (www.arg-uk.org.uk/ARG_UK_Insurance.pdf).

The toads started to move on the 13th February. I thought, "Great, the toads will hopefully be moving on the 14th February (Valentines Day)" because this would be a good news angle. In fact even though a BBC cameraman came out with us there were no toads at all on both sites. So the saying never work with animals came true on that night. Since then the toads have been moving in a steady stream across the road into the breeding ponds. A wall of sound greets you on suitable evenings, from the toad chorus, which is really something to experience.

We have set up a blog for the toad patrol and you can access this on http://alresfordtoadpatrol.blogspot.com We will be updating this blog regularly with news on how the toad crossings are going and whether we manage to find other toad crossings in our town and surrounding villages as many have come to light through press coverage in local newspapers.

So far we have rescued over 100 toads at Avington Park but the Drove Lane toad crossing has produced far fewer at around 10 to 12 in total.

I have ordered high visibility vests which can be used by volunteers on toad patrols. If anyone would like to order some please contact me for further details.

Jon Cranfield 07769 644354
Jcranfield@arg-uk.org.uk

Acknowledgements

Thanks goes to Mark Hampton, John Vaulters, Sue and Gina, Cressida Wheelwright, Natalie Carpenter, Chris Rochfort for all they help and assistance so far on this toad patrol. Lets keep up the good work!

Toads about to cross a road on their way to a breeding pond - photo by Essex Amphibian and Reptile Group

Sand Dune Management for Sand Lizards

David Orchard, chair of South Lancashire ARG

The first weekend in March 2007 saw ARGSL return to work on the sand dunes of Talacre beach in North Wales. This is some distance from the volunteers home patch of South Lancashire, but it wasn't too far to travel when the opportunity arose to help manage an important herp site! The aim of the weekend was to assist Flintshire Countryside Service in their management of Gronant and Talacre Dunes SSSI and SAC.

The site is important for sand lizards and natterjack toads and the work itself was a task familiar to volunteers everywhere - removing scrub to maintain the dune habitat and prevent succession to woodland. Sand lizards have been re-introduced into North Wales by HCT and they have established themselves at a number of sites including this one at Talacre. Regular surveys have been monitoring the sand lizard population, leading to claims that it could be one of the most successful reintroductions in the world EVER! (but more on this another time).

Two of the Flintshire Rangers worked with the twelve volunteers over the weekend, ensuring that all went smoothly and that cut stumps were treated immediately with herbicide.

Two nights accomodation was provided free of charge by Presthaven Sands Caravan Park in return for the work, so the volunteers enjoyed a great weekend break as well as some hard work.

This was the fourth weekend spent by the volunteer team on the site and the group hopes to return to the dunes of North Wales in the autumn. ARGSL has been joined on each task weekend by a large contingent from the Bolton Conservation Volunteers. By the two groups joining forces and working together in partnership much more has been acheived.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Flintshire Countryside Service for their thorough organisation and preparations for the weekend which made the event a great success. Many thanks also to the support from Bolton Conservation Volunteers, without whom the weekend could not have taken place.

Partnership working: ARGSL and Bolton Conservation Volunteers working together in North Wales
- photo by Colin Mather

ARG insurance - some FAQ's

David Orchard
vice chair of ARG UK

Arranging insurance is a burden that ARGs could do without, but it's an essential part of running any volunteer group. The ARG UK policy is the most economical way of insuring the usual ARG activities, but groups need to ensure that some simple steps are taken to make sure they are covered. Some frequently asked questions are:

What is included in ARG UK insurance?

The ARG UK policy covers groups for:

- Public liability insurance of £5 million, (in case a member of the public wanted to claim against the group).
- Personal injury, (in case a group member sustained a serious injury during an ARG activity).
- Member to member cover, (in case a member of the group wanted to claim against another group member.)

Is the use of chainsaws covered under this policy?

No. If your group is intending to use a chainsaw during management work, please make alternative arrangements to insure the chainsaw user.

Are Toad Patrols covered by the policy?

If a toad patrol is being run by an ARG as part of their events programme, then it will be covered. However, if a toad patrol is running independently from an ARG it will need its own insurance.

Does a group have to be affiliated to ARG UK to be covered by the insurance policy?

Yes. This policy only covers the ARG UK network, so if your group is not affiliated to ARG UK, the insurers will not recognise your group as being covered by the policy.

Are non ARG members covered to take part in activities?

Non members are covered, (as any member of the public would be), by the "public liability" part of the policy. However only ARG members will be covered by the other parts of the policy. The reason why groups need to keep up to date lists of members and send a copy of the "ARG UK working agreement" to us is so that we have proof of who is covered by the policy.

What sort of things do I need to think about when organising an ARG event?

Make sure that you've considered the potential risks and done your best to avoid any accidents. Complete a risk assessment and ensure that participants have read (and understood) it. Make sure everyone knows what they are doing and have the correct clothing and equipment for the event that you are planning. It may be necessary to limit the number of participants for some events, especially if you're short of experienced volunteers to help with supervision.

Caption competition

- photo by David Orchard

This photo shows what happens when a plan doesn't come together - in this case the plan was to excavate a new pond for great crested newts. Luckily the driver survived unscathed, though the same couldn't be said for the machine, reminding us that ponds can be dangerous and take us by surprise now and again. Some captions sent in were,

"I hope those bloody newts are grateful!!",

'Errr - I'll get my coat!'

The photo for this issue's caption competition is from the HWM in January. Part of the "Have I got newts for you?" quiz was to make something herp related out of balloons - a task which some people completed more successfully than others! If you have a suitable caption, please e-mail it to the editor at Dorchard@arg-uk.org.uk

Can you help ARG UK?

ARG UK is run entirely by volunteers and if you're able to join us you'd be very welcome! For further info please contact our chair at Jclemons@arg-uk.org.uk