



ARG Today

Newsletter of the Amphibian and Reptile Groups of the UK

Around the ARGs

Herefordshire Amphibian and Reptile Team

Herefordshire Amphibian and Reptile Team is almost mid-way through an ambitious, two-year reptile project *What's That Snake?* The project has reached over 5000 members of the public through school visits, roadshows, survey training and talks, far exceeding initial expectations and demonstrating



the great interest out there for Britain's 'less understood' wildlife. Project Officer Nigel Hand (Hereford Nature Trust, 01432 356872) has spent much of the reptile activity season of spring and summer training teams of volunteers to survey known reptile sites and record their findings. Four surveys have been set up, including one covering the Malvern Hills. Volunteer surveyors have proved extremely enthusiastic with many of them making far more visits to their site than the prescribed four. Feedback has included photographs of not only adders, grass snakes, common lizards and slow-worm but even Herefordshire's first sighting of a black adder. Further site surveys are planned for 2010.

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What's That Snake? has visited over 1000 children in 14 schools throughout Herefordshire, and the response has been tremendous. Nigel has found that children really engage with the reptiles and he, and their teachers, are impressed by how much knowledge they have absorbed.

The project plans to visit 40 schools during its course. With such positive feedback a *What's That Snake?* DVD and a teachers' pack for schools are being planned.

A species identification/recording leaflet, with an added return section for details of reptile sightings, and a reptile habitat management guide, aimed at landowners have been produced by the project.

Source: HART Newsletter 21 (July 2009)

Avon Amphibian and Reptile Group

Iain Adderton

Volunteers from the Avon Amphibian and Reptile Group have been given permission to undertake reptile surveys in two cemeteries, one in Bath and one in Bristol. Both cemeteries are managed with a view to conserving wildlife while maintaining the needs of visitors (both past, present and future!). The mix of tall ruderal vegetation, collapsed headstones and subsided graves provides excellent reptile habitat.

The survey in Bath is ongoing and the results are being passed to Bath and North East Somerset Council so that they can continue to manage the site

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Slow-worm from a Bristol cemetery

to further promote reptile and amphibian populations. The survey in Bristol has added to the existing information on the status and extent of the resident slow-worm population.

Bristol Water Plc. has kindly given permission for a grass snake survey at Chew Lake, initiated last year, to continue and incorporate new areas. In 2008, a small area of habitat containing two ponds was found to support a good population of snakes with five being found under ten mats placed around the margins of one pond. Surveys this year have recorded snakes at previously unrecorded locations and continue to demonstrate the value of the existing ponds with young snakes being captured.

In addition to the surveys, Bristol Water Plc. has agreed to the creation of compost heaps around the ponds to provide additional egg laying sites and also to build two reptile hibernacula. The value to the compost and hibernacula will be discovered next year... fingers crossed!

From ARAG News Summer 2009.

Cumbria Amphibian and Reptile Group

CARG relaunched in February, with a well attended meeting in Ambleside that served to demonstrate the level of enthusiasm the county. Activities commenced immediately with a number of toad patrols taking place across the county and a number of previously un-recorded sites being identified. Paul Baker led a NARRS training event at Sillioth in April, which resulted in a number of members gaining NARRS licenses for conducting great crested newt surveys; as a result of this three new NARRS squares have been surveyed this year with at least one producing good numbers of great crested and

palmate newts. A two-day joint meeting with Yorkshire ARG was held at Sandscale Hawes on the 29th and 30th of May which involved a guided walk, led by National Trust staff, on the Friday evening, giving us chance to hear natterjacks, and then a tour of the reserve on the Saturday with an informative talk on the habitat management that takes place at Sandscale Hawes not only for herps but also the numerous other nationally scarce species found there. CARG is currently assisting Neil Roberts of Liverpool John Moores University to collect field data on slow-worms selected body temperature for a study he is conducting as part of his MPhil.

CARG has a committee in place, and is in the process of applying for funding and will be launching a number of initiatives shortly. Anyone interested in becoming a member or getting involved in any of our activities should contact Sam Griffin, 016973 23939, 07903193610) sam@heskethecology.com, or check out the website <http://groups.google.com/group/CARG> or the facebook group (Cumbria Amphibian and Reptile Group (CARG)).

Sam Griffin

Oxfordshire Summary

Rob D'Ayala reports that there is insufficient support to formally constitute an ARG in Oxfordshire, but he and several colleagues have been active nevertheless. Four ponds were dug at Sutton Courtenay in March. Rod has also been trialling Crassula control methods at this site. Great crested newt is present, but its status is threatened by sticklebacks. The new ponds are intended to dry out occasionally to provide a breeding sites for the newts safe from fish predation. Rod has also trained MSc students from Oxford Brookes University in great crested newt survey.

Adder status in Oxfordshire is poor. Presence is confirmed from only a single site, but Rod is planning to survey several other sites to check some reported, but unverified, sightings.

Rough Guide to BAP

Dorothy Wright and John Baker provide the background to the new herp SAPs

Origins

The UK Biodiversity Action Plan, published in 1994, was created to conserve and enhance biological diversity within the UK and to contribute to the conservation of global biodiversity, through all appropriate mechanisms. It was produced after the UK signed the UN Convention on Biological Diversity at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. This had the objectives of conserving biodiversity, using it sustainably and equitably, and required contracting parties to *develop national strategies, plans or programmes for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity*.

The BAP process drew heavily on partnership working.

Action plans were drawn up by the statutory agencies for 391 species and 45 habitats ('priority' species and habitats). Species Action Plans (SAPs) were intended to maintain or enhance populations and their range. These plans include:

- Objectives High-level aims of the plan
- Targets Measureable goals set to measure progress towards objectives
- Actions Actions needed to achieve objectives

Herps included in the original priority listings

- Great crested newt
- Pool frog
- Natterjack toad
- Sand lizard
- Marine turtles (grouped plan)

Review

The first full review of the UK BAP was carried out in 2005 by Lead Partners and Steering Groups for the SAPs and Habitat Action Plans (HAPs). This involved:

- Reporting on progress
- Revision of targets
- Updating priority lists

The outcomes of the review had a number of key changes. To reflect that biodiversity conservation is now the responsibility of devolved administrations, targets for each country (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) (as well as the UK) were required. The targets were also structured differently and became SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time specific). 'Achievable'

raises some questions, as a plan could set targets highly likely to be achieved through being unambitious. The HCT (now part of the newly formed Amphibian and Reptile Conservation) adopted a policy of producing plans with actions required to reach a favourable conservation status rather than setting low targets which would be, nevertheless, easy to achieve.

The SAP targets need to include range and population size categories. However, the *Targets Review* also enabled new types of target to be set, allowing the resilience of a species to be included. A good example of this is the addition of a viability target for great crested newts (Target 4). Those drawing up plans may want to include indicators or performance measures. These are measurable features of a plan which, when measured over time, can help to assess progress towards achieving targets. They should be easily measurable and hence may be of relevance to local BAP practitioners.

Reviewing the lists of priority species and habitats

In 2005, the Biodiversity Reporting and Information Group (BRIG) (with input from NGOs) undertook a review of the priority species and habitats in response to new information and specific conservation requirements.

Species added to the priority listings

- Common toad
- Viviparous lizard
- Slow-worm
- Grass snake
- Smooth snake
- Adder

Publication/Revision of Species Action Plans

Over the last few months The Herpetological Conservation Trust produced draft Species Action Plans for the 'new' BAP priority species (common toad, widespread reptiles [grouped] and smooth snake), and revised the plans for the original priority species. These are available from the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust website www.arc-

trust.org. The Species Action Plans will be reviewed in March 2010 to allow for any amendments to be made and additional actions to be included. We are keen to receive your input to this work, so if you have any comments (additions/amendments etc.) please contact Dorothy Wright at Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (dorothy.wright@arc-trust.org).

The new plans are divided up into five sections dealing with different areas, in much the same manner as the original SAPs)

1. Action Plan/SAP Management
2. Policy and Legislation
3. Species and Habitat Management
4. Advisory and Communications
5. Research and Monitoring

These plans include all actions required for a comprehensive conservation strategy for each species/group. The right-hand column indicates the level at which each action

should be taken (UK, country, regional or local). ARGs, working locally, will be most interested in the actions labeled with 'L' in this column. The next step for Amphibian and Reptile Conservation is to produce plans targeted specifically for each level. So, in future there will be a framework for different levels and sectors (including ARGs).

Why ARGs Should Engage with the BAP Process

Why bother wading through a lot of paperwork, when you would rather be out surveying or managing habitat task or just 'doing stuff as you used to'? The brief answer is that Biodiversity Action Planning provides the framework within which wildlife conservation is done. If you want to continue to 'do the stuff you used to', then couching it within terms of SAPs may help you to achieve your aims. At the very least, working within the parameters of a SAP can give greater credibility to your herps conservation work and may assist with some funding applications. More importantly, a SAP prioritises particular activities that will benefit herps conservation.



Signposting

Within the herp plans there are Signposted Actions, in green boxes. The text in the green boxes contains actions identified under a 'signposting' exercise carried out by a species expert group to, among other aims, identify priority actions. Actions within the SAPs which relate to signposted actions are indicated as such with a green 'sign post' tag.

My Local Biodiversity Partnership Doesn't Use SAPs

Among some biodiversity practitioners there is move away from SAPs, probably because there are now so many priority species that it would be impractical to develop and work from plans for all of them. Sometimes this attitude translates to the view that

managing habitats will take care of species. Herps, however, provide some good examples of species that have not only been neglected, but actually suffer, under plans focused solely on managing habitat. Guidance given under the England Biodiversity Delivery Framework proposes an approach that integrates species and habitats, rather than excluding species. The UK Herp SAPs do not necessarily have to be translated into local SAPs – but their actions should be included within whatever framework is adopted locally. They provide a focus for those specifically interested in herps and they are a checklist of actions that should appear in local BAP work, either as stand-alone plans, or integrated within Habitat Action Plans.

ARG Engagement with BAP

During a workshop at the Herp Workers Meeting 2009, considering engagement with the BAP process, views of participants were used to draw up a list of the most important things that ARGs can do to participate in the BAP process. These are given below in approximate order of priority assigned by the workshops.

Join/engage with local biodiversity forum/

partnership/officer.

Raise awareness e.g. talks to schools and youth groups, production of advisory literature.

Act as local advocates for herps interests (ambassadors for herps) including watching briefs on projects and processes.

Measure and report on local status

Survey and record and ensure data flow.

Identify point of contact in the ARG

Provide local expertise

Provide targeted training (e.g. for site managers, planners).

Direct projects

Assist with delivery of actions and take ownership of specific actions.

Target local surveys and actions

Ensure liaison/networking and community involvement.

Write/review action plans

Report on the Biodiversity Action Reporting System (BARS).

Provide information re planning issues e.g. records, guidance regarding herps in the planning system, integration of herps interests in forward planning and planning control.

Identify significant sites/populations and develop local site selection criteria.

Further guidance

Amphibian and Reptile Conservation will produce a guidance note in the future, to provide greater detail of recent developments within Biodiversity Action Planning.

References

Gavin Measures. UK Biodiversity Action Plan Targets Review –Lead Partners/Agencies. Natural England.

UK Biodiversity Partnership Standing Committee (2007). Conserving Biodiversity – The UK Approach. Defra.

Care of CB2 Torches



The battery in the

Cluson CB2 torch (popular with amphibian surveyors and as supplied to several ARGs via funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation) is lead-acid (similar in principle to the battery in your car). The battery will work better and last longer if cared for properly. The single factor that most reduces battery life is leaving it discharged. Over the field season it is fairly easy to develop a routine of re-charging after use. During prolonged periods when not in use (possibly most of the year for amphibian survey purposes) the battery will discharge gradually. So,

Re-chargeable torch batteries need proper care—even outside the survey season

it is important not to leave your survey torch 'on the shelf' from one season to the next – it should be recharged occasionally.

Although it is sometimes thought that a torch should be run prior to recharging, Cluson advises that this is not the case for CB2 torches. All you have to do is fully recharge the battery every three to four months. As the battery ages you should recharge more frequently, as often as every month in an older battery. If you have a the charger with only the red light to indicate charging in progress, then full charge takes about 12 hours. If you have one with the red/green light system, then full charge is indicated by the green light.

Torch batteries do not last for ever, so you should be prepared to purchase a replacement every five years or so. Replacement batteries (and other spares for CB2 torches) can be obtained from Envisage Wildcare – RRP: £18.00 + VAT and postage. The distributor for Clulites in the Ecology market is Envisage Wildcare, 01793 724848, envisage-wildcare.co.uk/index.php

Cluson has a Workshop Manual for the CB2, which can be downloaded from the ARG UK website.

Interview with Howard Inns

The author of *Britain's Reptiles and Amphibians* and Vice-Chair of Amphibian and Reptile Conservation talks about the new WILDGuides publication, the newly formed ARC Trust and the ARGs



You've had a life-long interest in reptiles and amphibians. Was there a particular 'road to Damascus' event, or was it something that developed gradually.

I've been interested for as long as I can remember. There are some very early encounters that are etched on my memory—seeing a grass snake cross the path in Ruislip Woods in North West London where I grew up was one. I was probably five or six at the time. From when I was seven, I have a clear memory of catching a couple of viviparous lizards at The Warren in Folkestone where my grandparents lived. My interest continued as a teenager and I got involved in conservation in my mid twenties, almost thirty years ago.

Until the recent merger between The Herpetological Conservation Trust and Froglife, you've been a Trustee of the former. Has

there been a particular achievement of The HCT in which you take most pride?

What gives me most pride is our reserves. It's an inspiration to see sites like Great Ovens Hill in Dorset, Woolmer Forest in Hampshire, or Crooksbury Common in Surrey and see how well managed they are and to be able to find the animals we are all interested in. Our particular achievement has been to never lose sight of the importance of practical, on-the-ground conservation.

What do you do for a living?

My career is in IT and Telecommunications and I currently work for a Yorkshire based telecommunications company in a sales and marketing role focused on our public sector customers. It might sound very different to my role as a Trustee but, believe me, there is very little difference in the business and interpersonal skills

required in either environment.

Preparing the WILDGuides publication must have made big demands on your time. How long have you been working on it and what motivated you to produce the guide?

It was an immense amount of work, in fact it surprised me just how much was required. However much knowledge you think you have, if you are presenting information for other people there's a lot of verification to do and a mental shift to put yourself

in the position of the reader. Lots of late nights were required to avoid it affecting my job and, in total, it probably took a year. My motivation was to fill a gap in the market - I was very keen to end up with a comprehensive, accurate and well illustrated guide that anybody from a child to an environmental consultant could

pick up and read. With WILDGuide's help I hope I've come close to that.

How did you go about locating the photographs used in the guide?

I particularly wanted photographs of typical, UK animals as they would look in the wild. So often you see photos of our species that just don't look right and I was keen to avoid that. I was very, very lucky because Fred Holmes, who is an outstanding photographer, worked with me from the outset and has contributed a huge proportion of the photos. There were a lot of other contributors and I used and abused my network of contacts who in turn put me in touch with others. So apologies to those whom I bombarded with requests, but everybody's generosity will help the book generate additional funds for the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust.

One thing to consider for field guide photos is that it is important to get the complete animal in the shot,

Adder
Vipera berus

Britain's only venomous snake which is an inhabitant of open, predominantly dry habitats. Although good populations still exist on heathland and moorland nature reserves, the Adder has declined significantly in many places where it was previously common.

ADULT
A short, stocky snake with a distinct dark zig-zag dorsal pattern and often a row of dark spots along each flank. The head pattern is complex, often with an inverted Y-shaped or X-shaped mark (see page 42). The eyes are red with a vertical pupil reminiscent of a cat's eye. The scales are strongly keeled. Males typically have black markings against an off-white background with a steel-grey underside. In the breeding season male Adders look very bright, often with a blue tinge. Females typically have dark brown markings against a light brown or straw-coloured background with a dull brown underside. Both sexes are very variable in appearance and individuals of various shades of brown, grey, black-red and even purplish colour have been recorded. Wholly black, melanistic specimens are frequent and, in some areas, make up a significant proportion of the population. It is always safest to assume that any black snake encountered is an Adder.

UK BAP Priority Species
Native: localised

Adult:	Male 40–55 cm Female 50–70 cm; occasionally longer
Hatchling:	15 cm

HATCHLING
Often brick-red, but otherwise resembles an adult.

SLOUGH (page 39)
Sloughed skins are frequently found, particularly in spring near hibernacula. The scales are obviously keeled and the zig-zag pattern is clearly visible.

OBSERVATION TIPS
Look for Adders in early spring sunshine from late February when they will look together close to their hibernation sites.

NOTE: A hatchling basking deep in the vegetation.
NOTE: A typically coloured male.
NOTE: The brown colouration and fester appearance is typical of the female.

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including the tail, and to get as much of it in focus as possible. So check the AV settings on your camera, as this will help you juggle with depth of field, and practice using a monopod for a bit of stability in the field.



Wall lizard photographs from the WILDGuide

The wall lizard photographs in the guide were all taken by you. Are you particularly fond of wall lizards?

I've no special interest in wall lizards but I was keen to get the context right for the images. The male on that page was a 'staged' shot, i.e. the animal was caught and placed on a rock and you can see the difference between that and the natural shots.

I'm actually concerned about the wall lizards on Bournemouth Cliffs – which are alive with them. Sand lizard numbers on the Cliffs are down. More work is needed to understand the interactions between the two species. What I do find disappointing is that there are clearly herpetologists who feel that it is acceptable to break the law by deliberately introducing these animals onto sensitive sites like the Bournemouth Cliffs.

You are now Vice-chair of the Trustees of Amphibian and Reptile Conservation. What does this involve?

The Trustee role is essentially that of financial governance, setting strategy and supporting the employees who look after the day-to-day

management and running of the Trust. Because the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust is so new – we are still bringing The HCT and Froglife together – there is a lot to do at the moment. Trustees meet formally three times a year but there are plenty of other less formal meetings. The relationship between the Trustees (who are volunteers) and the employees is good and I like to think that, on the whole, we have a very open and supportive dialogue.

The HCT has supported the ARGs for some time. Do you think that this will continue under Amphibian and Reptile Conservation?

Absolutely. For 'on the ground conservation' it is absolutely critical for the simple reason that there's so much to do at a local level. Amphibian and Reptile Conservation's role is to establish best practice and provide a single co-ordinated voice but it must also support the ARGs in their local initiatives. This may be through advice or training but also, where possible, through grant aid. Also we're always keen to hear more from the ARGs about ways we can support their work.

There have been concerns that development of Amphibian and Reptile Conservation's friendship scheme (Frog Friends) will take membership away from ARGs – and one fear is that this could spell the beginning of the end for ARGs. Do you have any thoughts on this?

I believe that people join different organisations for different reasons. The impression I get from the many ARG members I know is that they join their local ARG because they want to get involved in things at a local level. Our friendship scheme, whilst it also offers involvement, complements this by providing a broader, national context and will appeal to those with a general interest who want to be kept informed. I would also like to think that the modest rates charged by both Amphibian and Reptile Conservation and the ARGs means that individuals can join both.

What do you see as the main challenges ahead for ARC and how do you think the organisation will meet them?

Bringing The HCT and Froglife together is clearly a major internal challenge and one we are already engaged in. We'll meet the challenge by hard work and careful decision making. Externally we need to help everybody, particularly ARG members understand what we do and what we stand for and we'll do that by establishing highly effective communications. The other big challenge we all face is to prevent some of our precious widespread species, for example the grass snake, viviparous lizard and common toad, becoming rarities. We'll meet that challenge by 'on the ground' conservation effort using well proven techniques and that's a job for us all.

Review: *Britain's Reptiles and Amphibians* Howard Inns

David Orchard (Amphibian and Reptile Group of South Lancashire)

For those of you interested in Britain's reptiles and amphibians (all of you I hope!) WILDGuides have produced an excellent new field guide. Every ARG member, wildlife enthusiast or serious herpetologist should have a copy.

So what's the attraction of this book? How can anyone write a whole guide to such a relatively small number of species...and is there anything new to say about them anyway? If you need convincing about the merits of this new book, read on...

Britain's Reptiles and Amphibians is written by Howard Inns in an engaging style that communicates effectively with both newcomers to the subject and more experienced herpetologists alike. The text is clear and simple, yet informative and the layout has been designed to communicate the large amount of information effectively.

The guide is comprehensive resource for the identification of our reptiles and amphibians at every life stage. The text and photographs are clear enough and give the information needed to identify individual animals in the field. For example, if you were unsure of the difference between a male and female common lizard, or of the difference between a smooth/palmate newt larva and that of a great crested newt, this book has the photos to show you.

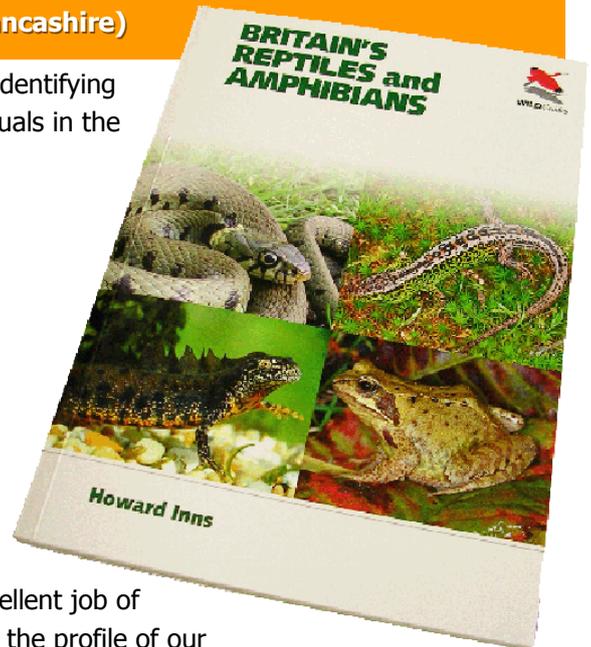
The photography is excellent. Many of our native species are difficult to find in the field and these photographs are probably the nearest most people will get to knowing what some of these animals look like. Some of the photographs must have taken hours, if not days (or a lifetime of dedication!) to obtain. Most people will never see a smooth snake eating a common lizard, a grass snake shedding its skin or two male adders competing for a female – so it's good to see them here.

In addition to the all important information on identification, distribution, habitat and life histories of our native species, the guide also includes non-native species and escapes that may be encountered. There is also some useful additional information, such as an introduction to species classification and conservation.

As if all this wasn't enough, this guide comes with a clear plastic dust cover – a useful and practical feature that will encourage enthusiasts to use it

when identifying individuals in the field.

This guide does an excellent job of raising the profile of our amphibians and reptiles and illustrates why we've all become herpers. In our collective quest to convert more people to the cause of amphibian and reptile conservation this book is a valuable resource....I've already bought a stash as Christmas presents for family and friends!



Britain's Reptiles and Amphibians

RRP £17.95, available from the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation website www.arc-trust.org, or from WILDGuides (www.wildguides.co.uk or telephone Brian 01628 529297).

As with all WILDGuides, a portion of sales goes to support conservation causes, in this case Amphibian and Reptile Conservation.

Have you seen an amphibian or reptile recently?

If Howard's book has given you added impetus to go out and look for amphibians or reptiles, why not make the most of your good work by passing on your observations to the nearest ARG or records centre? Many parts of the country are still under-recorded so new records are always useful.

Water Beetles Great and Small

Amphibian surveyors don't just turn up frogs, toads and newts



Cybister lateralimarginalis

This field season Garth Foster of the Balfour-Browne Club (dedicated to water beetles) requested that amphibian surveyors look out for *Cybister lateralimarginalis* (the peardrop). This is a large water beetle which has not been found in England for some time. There are records from a handful of sites in Essex from early in the 19th Century. *Cybister* does occur on the Continent and has been regarded as a candidate to recolonise Britain as a consequence of climate change (Sutton, 2008). Perhaps surprisingly, a single, dead specimen was collected from Leighton Moss, in Lancashire (Thomas, 2009) prompting the alert to amphibian surveyors.

Netting and bottle-trapping often reveal water beetles, but many amphibian surveyors may not be able to identify them to species. *Cybister*, however, is notable on the basis of its size – it is a bit larger than the familiar great diving beetle, *Dytiscus marginalis*. Looking more closely, it does not have the pale border all the way around the pronotum – just around the lateral margins; it is a smoother shape, and often with a beautiful green sheen. The back legs are very muscular and the beetle can move more rapidly than *Dytiscus*. Photographs can be seen at www.microcosmos.nl/beet1gal.htm

Will Watson (Herefordshire ARG) has made another important water beetle find during his amphibian survey work – but at the other end of the size spectrum. In July he found the diminutive diver *Bidessus*

minutissimus (formerly the minutest diving beetle) among 17 species of water beetle netted from an abandoned limestone quarry on the English/Welsh border. The large pool is about 40 years old with a rock substrate. It supports extensive beds of a stonewort (*Chara*) and broad-leaved pondweed *Potamogeton natans*. The beetle, measuring less than 2 mm (small enough to slip through the relatively coarse mesh often used for amphibian surveys!), was netted from the shallow margins. Examination under a microscope revealed furrows on the pronotum extending half way down the elytra which indicated that it may be *Bidessus minutissimus*. This was duly confirmed by Garth Foster.

This is the first record of the diminutive diving beetle in England since 1908. *Bidessus minutissimus* is a Biodiversity Action Plan priority species, rated as Red Data Book 3 and is likely to be regarded as Vulnerable using regional IUCN criteria. Will's findings are reported in *Latissimus*, the newsletter of the Balfour-Browne Club.

On the amphibian front, Will found a sizable palmate newt population and two great crested newt tadpoles amongst the stonewort.

Please send any water beetle records to Professor Garth Foster, Balfour-Browne Club, latissimus@btinternet.com. For suspected *Cybister*, photographs of both the dorsal and the ventral sides would be useful (the upper part of the rear leg provides the best characters).

References

- Sutton, P. (2008). The larger water beetles of the British Isles. The Amateur Entomologists' Society.
- Thomas, J (2009). *Cybister lateralimarginalis* (De Geer) lives up to expectations. *Latissimus* 26, p. 23.
- Watson, W.R.C. (2009). *Bidessus minutissimus* in Herefordshire. *Latissimus* 26, p. 1.

Funding for Herp Habitats

There are three funding streams targeted specifically at supporting herp conservation work in the UK

100% Fund

This is ARG UK's own small grants scheme. The funding has been raised by donations to ARG UK (at the Herp Workers Meeting and from the Friendship Scheme) and from finance allocated by ARG UK itself. The scheme is aimed at ARGs because these groups

contain the expertise to best target and implement herps conservation projects. The awards are small (up to £250), but sometimes relatively small amounts can make the difference between a project happening or not.

Projects suitable for funding are those that will make

a tangible difference. So, contractor hire, or purchase of habitat management equipment will be regarded favourably. The scheme is not intended to fund survey work – because this is the core activity of ARGs and as such is usually carried out on a voluntary basis. We've tried to keep the application process as simple as possible.

- Herps conservation projects
- Small grants up to approximately £250
- Applications open to ARGs only
- Applications currently on a rolling basis
- Scheme run by ARG UK
- Contact John Baker, ARG UK

Great Crested Newt Grant Scheme

The Herpetological Conservation Trust's Grant Scheme for Great Crested Newt Conservation has been resurrected under the newly merged organisation (Amphibian and Reptile Conservation). This is a small grants scheme (typically up to £500, but larger amounts considered for bigger projects) designed to help to achieve targets of the UK great crested newt Species Action Plan (www.arc-trust.org/species/saps.php) which includes pond creation, management and restoration, terrestrial habitat management, survey work and local mapping studies.

The scheme is open to anyone (groups or individuals) working towards BAP targets for great crested newt, including councils, national parks and wildlife organisations and volunteer groups, including ARGs. Schools and community groups are also encouraged to apply.

The scheme is supported by the Countryside Council for Wales and Natural England.

- Great crested newt conservation projects to achieve SAP targets
- Grants typically up to £500 (but larger amounts considered for bigger projects).
- Applications open to all
- Applications currently on a rolling basis

Two tranches of this award will be available:

- September 2009-March 2010 (funding available now, but must be invoiced by March 2010)
- April 2010-March 2011 (deadline for applications 29 January 2010).

- Contact Dorothy Wright, 01202 391319, dorothy.wright@arc-trust.org

Million Ponds Project

The Million Ponds Project is a collaboration of major landowners and land managers, coordinated by Pond Conservation. Ultimately the aim is to reverse a century of pond loss, ensuring that once again the UK has over one million countryside ponds. The project aims to create 5000 ponds by 2012, 4000 will be 'clean water' ponds, the remainder will be created to benefit BAP species associated with ponds. The BAP species ponds will be supported with funding from Biffaward (landfill tax revenue)

Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, as a key partner in this project, is responsible for dealing with applications for the priority herp BAP species. These include the rarities, pool frog and natterjack toad, but also more widespread species, great crested newt, common toad and grass snake.

The project collates applications from England and Wales for a single annual bid to Biffaward. The first round of applications was submitted earlier this year and funds will be awarded this autumn. The next deadline is late spring 2010; keep an eye on the Pond Conservation website for further details www.pondconservation.org.uk

Applications for herp ponds are coordinated by Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, as a partner in the Million Ponds Project.

- Creation of ponds for BAP priority species
- Multiple pond schemes preferred, landscape projects considered favourably
- Applications open to all
- Next round of applications spring 2010
- Contact David Orchard, Ponds Project Officer with the Million Ponds Project: David.Orchard@arc-trust.org 01204 529312

Midlands Regional Conference Report

Natalie Walker (Warwickshire Amphibian and Reptile Team)

The ARG UK Midlands Regional Conference (27 June 2009), hosted by Warwickshire Amphibian and Reptile Team at Rugby High School, was well attended by the regional ARG committees, members, statutory and non-statutory organisations and other interested parties.

Jim Foster (Natural England) opened the conference, talking about developments, principles and practice of reptile habitat management. Topics discussed were positive and negative effects of habitat management and the silent threat posed by natural habitat succession. Often reptile habitat is fragmented and small in size leaving little chance of finding all of the features valuable to reptile species on a single site. Jim stated that a great deal of habitat management results in a tendency to manage habitats as to what they 'should look like', rather than focusing on objectives such as provision of good vegetation structure. Jim referred to Natural England's partnership with the Grazing Animals Project leading to the development of *Habitat Composer*, a design tool to understand and visualize habitat management in terms of structure rather than area. Jim also mentioned the production of the *Reptile Habitat Management Handbook* to be produced by the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust and developments with a new BAP framework, which will focus on managing BAP habitats for the species which thrive in them, as well as the need to manage the habitat itself using standard regimes.

Alan Shepherd gave a personal account of the beloved slow-worm, producing beautiful prose from Colin Simms and odes to the slow-worm, then mentioning interesting population statistics, such as the UK holding 3.5% of the global resource, and next delving into the difficulties and perhaps inability of determining population size for this species when large populations are encountered, quoting numbers from 1000 to 1600 per ha have been suggested. Alan mentioned that mark-recapture methods (dorsal and lateral view head photographs) were the most commonly used methods for estimating population abundance but that the Minimum Number Alive equation has also been used, but that there is essentially no scientifically robust way of determining population size. This was thought to be compounded by the number and type of variables that may affect any particular site.

Brian Laney gave a fascinating account of surveying the roadside verges along highways within the Midlands. For example he has found the A40 highway through Shropshire particularly good for reptiles. Perhaps one of the most interesting records was that of landlocked areas of the A483 – difficult terrain to survey. Here Brian found slow-worm within land between on/off slip roads and the main

highways. Brian used existing site records and potential dispersal corridors to identify roadside habitat likely to support reptiles. This strategy yielded new records for adder in Wakerley, and along roadside verges near to Fineshade Wood, Northamptonshire.

Jan Clemons (Warwickshire Amphibian and Reptile Team) described the *Warwickshire Reptile Quest*. This has prompted lots of opportunistic records of grass snake. Records of lizards indicate that common lizard sites tend to be isolated while slow-worm have a scattered distribution. The Warwickshire Amphibian and Reptile Team has investigated sites where adder – never an abundant species in the Midlands – has been recorded in the past (18 historical site records in the county). Repeated confusion of grass snake with adder by landowners has complicated the search for adder, but the *Reptile Quest* has found no current, credible records in the county. Given that the adder is now probably absent from Warwickshire, attention is now focused habitat assessments, with a view to identifying potential receptor sites should re-introduction be considered.

Chris Monk delivered an interesting insight into the Derbyshire ARG work on adders on moorland. Prior to his work, adder was known from only 13 one-km grid squares. Chris has established *Make the Adder Count* surveys, which have been assisted by volunteers including help from John Newton and South Yorkshire ARG. These surveys have redefined the local adder distribution, increasing the number of occupied one-km squares to 39, the majority of which are in the Peak District National Park. The highest counts have been made in 'new' squares. Interesting findings through his surveys have been that even within what is perceived as extensive suitable habitat, adder hibernation sites have tended to be relatively clustered. Even in locations where adder do not use communal hibernation sites, they tend to be restricted to specific areas. Chris' work indicates the importance of bracken stands in providing adder hibernation sites. This is a significant observation, given that bracken is regarded as an invasive plant on many sites and is often targeted for control. Chris has also found adders using prehistoric/Iron Age dry stone walls as hibernation sites. Over the study period 2005-2009 the first emergence of adders has ranged from 31st January to 18th February (this being after a period of heavy snow fall), although the timing of mating activity has been fairly consistent from year to year.

David Orchard, Ponds Project Officer with Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, discussed the Million Ponds Project and the resources available to help ARGs with

pond creation schemes including:

- The *Pond Creation Toolkit*, available on the Pond Conservation website.
- Species dossiers, to be produced this autumn, covering specific pond creation advice for each BAP species associated with ponds.
- On site advice for large-scale pond creation schemes, (>3 ponds), or projects focused on pond creation for BAP species associated with ponds (a full list of these is available of the Pond Conservation website).

David stated that of the 45 projects (creating 202 ponds) due to go ahead over the next six months, 42 of these (185 ponds) will benefit at least one of the priority herp BAP species.

Ian Tanner then presented a case study of great crested newt development hell (the hell being for the newts concerned). Ian discussed the issues that arose, but found that even when guiding a client through the licencing process that breaches were made. This resulted in him having to make reports to Natural England and to then guide the developer through a series of investigations by Natural England. This resulted in several instances where the project had to be dropped due to the risks taken by the client and eventually resulting in Ian terminating his involvement with the project.

Ian Jelley then presented WART's applications for the Million Pond Project, including site selection process detailing site suitability, presence of BAP species, access/landowner permissions, floodplain issues (land drainage consent required and spoil excavated to be disposed of off site), and difficulties of urban sites due to vandalism. Two sites are currently being put forward of Tocil Wood and Stonebridge Meadows.

The conference ended with a summary updates by local ARGs. Nigel Hand (Herefordshire Amphibian and Reptile Team), has started a *What's That Snake* project, even resulting in TV appearances! WART has been involved with NARRS training days, Million Ponds Project and Reptile Quest, the focus being on getting out there and doing field work. HART have again been incredibly active and through assistance from the Heritage Lottery Fund have produced a management leaflet for reptiles, an article for Hereford Life Magazine and have produced a DVD for schools. LARN reported on county reptile status for Common Lizard being isolated, poor slow-worm records, rare occurrences of Palmate Newt – found on one or two sites and Great Crested Newt are widespread, but not common. NARRS was not undertaken in Staffs this year, but is proposed for next year. There was no one available to comment for Gloucestershire or Shropshire, but John Wilkinson and Dorothy Wright (Amphibian and Reptile Conservation) had led a two-day NARRS training for Shropshire.

Also discussed was the much welcomed amalgamation of HCT and Froglife – to form Amphibian and Reptile Conservation. This provides potential benefits of better integration of herp conservation initiatives, provision of specialist staff to manage site for rare herp species, BAP species conservation advice, NARRS, research and monitoring provision, raising the profile of herps, development of legislation and policies and last, but not least, supporting ARG UK network.

Feedback on the conference content and relevance has been good. A big thank you must go to the organisers, Ian Jelley and Jan Clemons, and Rugby High School students who assisted with refreshments, the session chairs and speakers. The lunch time break offered an amazing spread of food and gave the opportunity to visit to Rugby High School's conservation area (all Jan Clemons' hard work) to see slow-worm and common lizard.

BHS/Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Joint Scientific Meeting

This joint meeting (formerly BHS/HCT Joint Scientific Meeting) has become a popular annual event. This year it will be held on Sunday 6th Dec at the usual venue, Bournemouth Natural Science Society, 39 Christchurch Road, Bournemouth.

The programme will be available in the second week of October.

Conferences

Full detail and registration forms from the hosting ARGs or the ARG UK website

The Conservation of UK Amphibians and Reptiles One-day Conference and Networking Event

Saturday, 24 October 2009 0945-1600. The Lecture Theatre, Leeds Art Gallery, The Headrow, Leeds City Centre, LS1 3AA.

Opportunities for amphibian and reptile conservation in farmland (Jim Foster) • Introducing great crested newts to Lower Wharfedale - conservation in action (Gordon Haycock) • The Million Ponds Project - serious pond creation for herps! Pascale Nicolet) • Learning from European experience - conservation of the fire-bellied toad. (David Orchard) • The alpine newt in northern England (Ian Bond) • The value of herp recording - a Kent based perspective (Lee Brady) • The Gibside grass snake recovery plan (John Grundy) • The birth of the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust (Howard Inns) • Pool frog update from Norfolk (John Baker) • The future of natterjacks in Cumbria? (Paul Edgar).

Hosted by North, East and West Yorkshire Amphibian and Reptile Group and the Amphibian and Reptile Group

South East Region Amphibian and Reptile Groups' Annual Conference

Saturday 21 November 2009 1000-1700. Loddon Hall, Twyford, Berkshire, RG10 9JA.

Great Crested Newts of Popley Pond – habitat creation case study (Matthew Smith, Berkshire Reptile & Amphibian Group) • Great Crested Newts Species Action Plan – a national perspective (Dorothy Wright (Amphibian & Reptile Conservation) • How effective are toad tunnels? • Gareth Matthes (Surrey Amphibian & Reptile Group) • Henley's assisted toad migration – over a decade of data • Alan Parfitt (Henley Wildlife Group) • Million Ponds Project (Pascale Nicolet, Pond Conservation) • Adder conservation at the Berks Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust's Warburg Reserve (John Cranfield, ARG UK) • Make the Adder Count 2005-2009 (John Baker, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation) • Conserving amphibians and reptiles in farmland (Jim Foster, Natural England) • Regional ARG round up and Conference Q & As.

Hosted by Berkshire Reptile and Amphibian Group.

The Conservation of Amphibians and Reptiles in Wales One-day Conference and Networking Event

Provisional Programme (additional speakers to be confirmed).

Saturday, 28 November 2009. Swansea University, Singleton Park, Swansea, SA2 8PP.

Introducing Sand Lizards in North and West Wales Chris Davis (ARC Trust) • Photography (Brett Lewis, KRAG) • Great Crested Newt Species Action Plan – a national perspective (Dorothy Wright, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation) • Making Adders Count (John Baker, ARG UK/Amphibian and Reptile Conservation) • Who speaks for the toad? Herpetofauna declines and biodiversity in the 21st Century • John Wilkinson (Amphibian and Reptile Conservation) • Work achieved so far by SWWARG.

Herpetofauna Workers Meeting 2010

The annual networking event for herps conservation.

Provisional date and venue: 29-31 January 2010, The Royal Court Coventry, Tamworth Road, Keresley, Coventry, CV7 8JG. We are hoping that ARG UK will again be able to offer exceptionally good value for money for this enjoyable and informative, two-day event. Any suggestions for speakers, workshops or themes, please contact your regional rep or John Baker.

Julia Wycherley

The herpetological community has lost Julia Wycherley, who died in hospital on September 9th. Her family was with her. Julia was a founder member of Surrey Amphibian and Reptile Group, which, with Sussex ARG, lays claim to be the first of the ARGs, established over twenty years ago. Surrey ARG continues to be a model group, pushing ahead with herp recording, making the best use of amphibian and reptile records. Julia was co-author of *Amphibians and Reptiles of Surrey*, published by Surrey Wildlife Trust in 2001.



Julia Wycherley being presented with the ARG UK award in 2008

Julia's particular interest in water frogs led her into the research of their calls, for which she achieved a doctorate from the University of Sussex. Her research into bioacoustics contributed towards establishing native status of the pool frog and Julia has been one of the key movers behind the pool frog reintroduction programme.

Julia has been a vigorous supporter of herps conservation. Her work was acknowledged with an MBE and by an award from ARG UK, received at the Herpetofauna Workers Meeting in 2008. This was

the first time that ARG UK recognised the efforts of an individual in this way. Though perhaps not as widely recognised as an MBE, Julia said that it meant a lot to her as it was 'from her peers'.

Over the years Julia has been a friend and mentor to many other herp workers. She will remain with us through them.

John Baker

Grass Snakes Return to Gibside

This summer two adult female grass snakes were recorded at Gibside. This has been particularly exciting because this

National Trust estate has been subject to a three-year grass snake recovery plan funded by SITA. Gibside, just west of Newcastle, is one of the northernmost locations for grass snakes in Eng-



land. Grass snakes had become scarce here over the last 20 years or so, probably because of gradually increasing shading by trees. The recovery programme has included habitat management and intensive survey. Work coordinated by John Grundy has restored areas of suitable habitat, creating hibernation sites, compost heaps for egg laying, new wetland areas for feeding, and opened up sunny glades to improve them for basking. However, extensive survey work failed to detect grass snakes on the estate for the first two years of the project.

This year, two large female grass snakes were found basking near a survey refuge. Last year grass snakes were recorded just across the river from Gibside near Far Pasture ponds, where Gateshead Council Countryside Team has also been making improvements to grass snake habitat.

The National Trust will review the recovery programme at the end of this year to ensure future recovery of the population of grass snakes in the area.

ARG Today is the e-newsletter of the Amphibian and Reptile Groups of the UK (ARG UK). It is edited by John Baker and funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation as part of Amphibian and Reptile Conservation's Widespread Species Project.



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