

# HopGossip!

25 Year Anniversary Edition!

Autumn/ Winter 2014



**In this issue ...**

**New Flintshire post**

**The anniversary of HCT and ARC**

**Habitat management on the Sefton Coast  
& Grass snakes and netting**

**CELEBRATING**



**amphibian and reptile  
conservation**





Amphibian and Reptile Conservation is a national wildlife charity committed to conserving amphibians and reptiles and the habitats on which they depend.



Working in partnership with  
Amphibian & Reptile Groups  
of the UK

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If you would like to contribute to the next edition please contact Angela Reynolds at [angela.reynolds@arc-trust.org](mailto:angela.reynolds@arc-trust.org)

Cover image: Grass snake © John Baker.

Hop Gossip is edited and designed by Angela Reynolds

Please note: the views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily the views of Amphibian & Reptile Conservation but those of the authors.

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## From the Editors desk

Welcome to the latest edition of *Hop Gossip*!

This year, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation is five years old! Our predecessor, The Herpetological Conservation Trust (HCT), from which ARC was born, is also celebrating it's 25th year in herpetofauna conservation. Many of us worked for HCT before it metamorphosed in to ARC in 2009 and we have seen ARC grow from strength to strength. Whilst we are all proud of what we have achieved, there is still so much more that needs to be done and in the coming years we will be working hard to achieve this.

Some of our Friends have been with us for the whole five years now and I want to thank each and every one of our Friends for your support. It really does mean a lot to us.

I hope you enjoy this special anniversary edition. There is something for everyone! Read the story of how ARC was born, help to keep the snakes in your garden safer, find out how habitat management work undertaken earlier this year brought success for sand lizards on the Sefton Coast and follow our guide to walking your dog in the countryside safely.

Our 2015 Friends Day will be a little different this year (please see the enclosed flyer). We will be in Hampshire undertaking some habitat management for natterjack toads. Fun for all ages! I'd love to see you there, it will be a great day out!

Have a brilliant summer!

With best wishes,

Angela

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## C.E.O.'s Corner

Dr Tony Gent



The fate of nature is inextricably linked to the interests of people – and people view this relationship in many different ways. For some it is a thing of beauty to be nurtured and respected while others, at least consciously, feel there is little or no connection to nature in their lives. It provides resources for humans – a whole range of products, services and commodities, and it has facets that people wish to manage or control. In some cases they simply don't like it or elements within it. For most it is a combination of these that come together to differing degrees to fit our own needs, perspectives and outlooks. Just as nature and wildlife is diverse so are people's views of it.

Through our work at ARC we meet and engage with people with a whole range of opinions about wildlife. Amphibians and reptiles somehow seem to bring out some of the more extreme views – especially with snakes in gardens and protected species on development sites. Our job is to encourage the conservation of herpetofauna. Clearly we cannot ask the animals their preferences. Even if we could, how would we reconcile the needs of different species' and habitats', or agree the right outcomes for species that form a predator-prey relationship? Instead, we rely on science and good old fashioned natural history skills to define the ecological needs. On our own nature reserves the field team can help put some of this in to practice. But so much more is about communicating with and engaging people – this is where the 'big wins' will be made for wildlife conservation.

We need to remember that our own views are part of the wide spectrum of opinion. We aim to help and encourage people who wish to conserve wildlife. We try to address the concerns, and hopefully change the views of those who are less sympathetic. Even within nature conservation there will be differing views and competing needs. Without doubt there are cases where 'habitat management', even on nature reserves, has caused problems for our reptile and amphibian species.

Increasingly ARC, along with other nature conservation bodies, is working in partnership. This allows more effective exchanges of ideas, better uses of resources and allows a more coherent message from the nature conservation sector. This is important as we need to be able to work at different levels. We must be able to discuss the finer details of the conservation needs of different habitats and species to make sure that the right conservation choices are made, while also being able to provide simple messages for those who do not need or wish to have the technical detail. The world of conservation is frequently criticised for being laden with over-technical jargon, while also being blamed for 'dumbing down'.

In seeking influence, we need to be astute to the world of politics since this is so important in defining what can and can't be achieved in the natural environment. As a charity we cannot, nor would we wish to, support or oppose any political party. The next few years will see a number of opportunities for people to express their views on the environment. Let's hope that these, whether through General or Local Elections, or referenda about membership of the UK or Europe, that politicians and voters, whatever their personal motives and feelings, give nature a voice and choose to listen to it.

**amphibian and reptile  
conservation**





## A Tribute to the Hon. Vincent Weir – Patron of ARC

By Helen Wraight - Admin & Finance Manager

**It is with great sadness that we report the passing of our benefactor and Patron, the Hon. Vincent Weir, in February of this year.**

Vincent was there from the start – when The Herpetological Conservation Trust (HCT) was founded by him in 1989, becoming Amphibian and Reptile Conservation in 2009. Vincent helped to set up and support a number of wildlife charities over the years and also gave generously to help young conservationists by supporting them in their Master's, PhD and postdoctoral studies. He was passionate about wildlife and conservation and did an enormous amount to conserve British wildlife but in a very quiet and unassuming way. He was a very private man and did not court or want publicity. He kept very much out of the limelight, but he took an active part in ARC's Trustee Meetings and was always there to offer advice and support. I remember my very first meeting with him at a Trustees Meeting in London. Vincent took great care of me that day and from that meeting a long affection and respect for him started and internally he became known affectionately as 'Uncle Vincent'. He was a gentleman in the true sense of the word, always charming and sometimes with a wicked sense of humour - it was always a pleasure to see him. Over the years we had many conversations and he was always interested and concerned to know how the Trust was getting on and what challenges it was facing.

At Vincent's funeral it was lovely to see so many people from the different conservation organisations he was involved with together in one place. It was amazing to hear the different stories of their involvement with Vincent and the different work that he supported over the years, and I think we all realised that his contribution to conservation was much wider than any of us really knew.

ARC has been extremely lucky to have someone like Vincent behind it – we would not have been able to undertake the work we have without his support and we and a lot of other conservation charities owe an awful lot to him. Vincent would have been proud that HCT/ARC has reached its 25<sup>th</sup> year of conserving our native amphibians and reptiles and is still going strong. Vincent was held in high regard within the Trust and he will be sadly missed by all who knew him.

## Iolo Williams - A new voice for ARC!

In the last issue of *Hop Gossip!* we gave you the breaking news that Iolo Williams had become our latest Patron. We are very much looking forward to working together and giving a bigger voice to amphibians and reptiles, not just in Wales but all over the country!

"I am delighted to be invited to be Patron of ARC. Through my media work, I have been aware for quite some time of the excellent work undertaken by ARC to protect and enhance our countryside for amphibians and reptiles, and to educate the public. Having grown up amongst grass snakes, slow-worms, frogs, toads and newts in mid-Wales, I know how important it is to ensure that the next generation of conservationists appreciate the wildlife around them and that we make sure that the plants and animals are there for them to enjoy."



Photo: © BBC Cymru Wales

## New partnership post for reptiles and amphibians in North East Wales

By Mandy Cartwright - Flintshire Countryside Ranger

Flintshire County Council and ARC have joined forces to create a new partnership post to develop amphibian and reptile conservation awareness in North Wales, along with acquiring and retaining sites to proactively manage for the long term.

I am local to Flintshire and have been involved in conservation in North East Wales for the past 6 years. I am very excited about starting this new exciting role with both Flintshire, where I started my career as a volunteer over 6 years ago, and Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust who I have worked with on projects such as the sand lizard reintroduction programme.

I have an innate passion for wildlife conservation and I am privileged to have been given this opportunity to be able to develop proactive projects in my own back garden!

**We'll hear more from Mandy in the next *Hop Gossip!***





## Staff & Trustee News



Bill Whitaker (left) stood down as a Trustee of ARC in March. Bill became a founding Trustee of the Herpetological Conservation Trust in 1989 (which metamorphosed into ARC in 2009). He will be missed as a very active, passionate and dedicated member of the ARC team.



David Fletcher, our GIS and Data Officer, left us in February to start a research PhD in predictive mapping of invasive fish. Georgia French (right) is our current GIS and Data Officer employed on a short term contract to work primarily on GIS and mapping of natterjack toads. Georgia will be leaving in August to start a PhD on the behaviour of great white sharks!



Matt Dowse joined ARC in the autumn of 2011 and left the Trust in June to join the South Downs National Park team in Brighton. He has been invaluable in his role as Wealden Field Officer and Volunteer Coordinator, and will be greatly missed. Robin Bassett, our Seasonal Field Officer (left), has become the new full time Wealden Field Officer.



### Great Heath Living Landscape By Gary Powell - Senior Reserves Manager



LOTTERY FUNDED WILDLINK

ARC are pleased to announce their involvement in a brand new project: The Great Heath. The Great Heath living landscape includes large areas of heathland recently sold off by the Canford Estate and purchased, with the help of a Heritage Lottery Fund grant, by a wildlife consortium consisting of ARC, Dorset Wildlife Trust (DWT), the Erica Trust, Poole Borough Council and Poole Harbour Commission.

We have now secured the long term future of a number of our key Dorset urban reserves that we previously managed under lease. Dunyeats, Corfe Hills and a large part of Parley Common are now owned by ARC, and we have a long-term agreement with the Erica Trust to manage Ferndown Common. Lytchett Heath will be run as a joint reserve with DWT (the new owners) where ARC will remain as managers of the terrestrial habitat on this important reptile site.

The consortium worked hard to put together a three year project involving four new Great Heath staff, to provide volunteer opportunities, enhanced visitor experiences to heathland sites in the form of new signage and interpretation, and increased monitoring of wildlife across the suite of reserves. Other sites will be added to the project to give a consistent approach and feel to the area, while still retaining the individual nature of each site and the organisation that manages it.



Great Heath events and walks have already started and many more are planned for the coming years. Check the ARC website for details of events that we are involved in and the Great Heath page for an overview of all activities.

ARC are very grateful to an anonymous donor and the British Herpetological Society for a generous financial contribution.

Photo: Great Heath Project staff. Katie Wilkinson, Bev Lagden, Nicky Hoar & Sally Wright. © Dorset Wildlife Trust.

Hop off the Press!

### Smooth snake copulation

By Stuart Handyside, Ben Limburn & Stuart Woodley - ARC Volunteers & Dr John Wilkinson - Science Programme Manager.

The smooth snake is Britain's rarest snake and is restricted to lowland heathland sites in southern England, many of which are in the county of Dorset. Recorded smooth snake copulations in the wild are rare, and smooth snake mating behaviour and birth are poorly documented. This area of the snake's ecology is therefore still not fully understood.

It was with some surprise and great interest that, whilst conducting fieldwork in late summer of 2013, Ben Limburn and Stuart Handyside observed copulation between two adult smooth snakes. At the time they were carrying out survey work trialling a new proposed 'Standardised Reptile Survey Methodology'. The snakes were found at an ARC managed site near to Wareham on the 27<sup>th</sup> of September, in the late afternoon. Weather conditions on site at the time were dry, with an air temperature of 21°C and cloud cover of 67%.



The copulating adults were found under a specifically placed tin, on a north-east facing slope, where the habitat consisted of dry heath leading to low lying wet heath. Three neonate (juvenile) smooth snakes were also found under the same tin and, although it is unknown if the female found in copulation had given birth to these juveniles, we certainly consider it a possibility. This adds a further dimension to smooth snake mating behaviour and birth; does mating occur straight after the female has given birth?

Both adult snakes were calm when handled and remained joined allowing Stuart Handyside to photograph the copulation and Ben to record their individual markings for future identification. Information gained from recorded copulations indicates a more protracted and complex mating behaviour than perhaps previously considered. It is now thought that mating can take place at two separate times of the year. Firstly after hibernation, in the period between May to early June, and secondly, in late August, and September. The adult females will give birth to live young in late August, September and October.

The notes we made have been published as a 'Natural History Note' in the *Herpetological Bulletin*. We aim to monitor this particular female during the spring and summer of 2014 to determine if the copulation has resulted in the female being gravid (pregnant).

Photo top right: Ben Limburn holding the copulating smooth snakes © Stuart Handyside.  
Below: Female smooth snake © Jerry Stanley.







## Is photography a blessing or a curse for reptiles?

By Jim Foster - Conservation Director

**Recent encounters in the field have made ARC's Conservation Director, Jim Foster, think twice about encouraging close-up photography.**

Wildlife photography is a flourishing activity. A flick through our Facebook pages uncovers a wealth of stunning images of reptiles and amphibians. We feature many fantastic photos in these very pages. So why include the word "curse" in the title above?

Over the last few years, ARC has detected an emerging disquiet about the unintended impacts of photography, especially on adders. Some surveyors have found animals on their local patch suddenly attracting intense interest. People wishing to get that classic shot may generate substantial disturbance to their subject. In some cases, the photographer even captures the animal so that they can pose it. With severe disturbance, the animal may search for cover and thus forego basking, foraging or mating. And at some sites it seems there are well-worn routes trodden by photographers, possibly damaging the vegetation.



We think this is a growing issue, as species information and increasingly sophisticated technology converge. The internet is a ready source of information on precisely where to head for that longed-for reptile encounter, partly thanks to the conservation community's efforts to improve species recording. Digital photography means you can take literally hundreds of photos in one session. Lenses on even modest cameras now let you snap away only a few centimetres from your subject's nose (or rostral scale, if you prefer!).

Yet there is an upside to this, surely. If photography increases engagement with nature, isn't that a good thing? Why not give people another reason to like herps? And an abundance of high quality photos helps with research and profile-raising: identification guides, leaflets, websites and so on.

Clearly there is a balance to be achieved here. We need to avoid the harm from excessively intrusive photography, yet encourage its beneficial sides. ARC is working on photography guidance and we would like to hear your views. Why not Email the Editor [angela.reynolds@arc-trust.org](mailto:angela.reynolds@arc-trust.org) with your thoughts?

Photo top right: Close up shot of an adder © Chris Dresh. Above: Adders in Wildwood's excellent outdoor exhibit seem habituated to visiting photographers © Jim Foster. Right: Ready for my close-up? Macro shots, such as this smooth snake, mean inevitable disturbance © Jim Foster.



## Science & Research

### Specimens of toad fly needed

By Dr Jamie Stevens - University of Exeter



The toad fly (*Lucilia bufonivora*), is recognised as an obligate parasite of toads and frogs in Britain and Europe; it causes considerable suffering to infested host amphibians. Infestations typically begin in the nasal cavities and can spread rapidly throughout the head, leading to blindness and a lingering death. Infested animals are sometimes reported as emitting 'clucking' sounds as their breathing is disrupted by maggots blocking their nasal passages! This fly is recognised as the only obligate parasitic blowfly species in Britain and to date, only a handful of specimens of this enigmatic fly species have been studied.

I have just received a summer studentship grant from the Genetics Society to research the taxonomy and genetic diversity of this fly. I have some samples, but am in urgent need of additional specimens. Maggots can be easily collected alive from infested frogs and toads, an action that may in some cases save the life of the host.

Maggots can be collected and preserved as follows:

Having removed maggots from the host animal with forceps, they can be dropped live into high % alcohol [ethanol] (which we can send out in small, well-packaged vials);

An alternative is to send live maggots direct to us at Exeter in a small rigid, squash-proof, escape-proof(!) container;

A third alternative is to squash larvae onto clean thick paper (ideally filter paper), to dry this off quickly and thoroughly, and then to post paper(s) to us in Exeter. Multiple maggots can be squashed onto one paper [do not store for any length of time in plastic bag].

Please contact me if you come across any toad fly infestations and I can advise or send out collection materials. Tel: 01392 723775  
Email: [j.r.stevens@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:j.r.stevens@exeter.ac.uk)



Photo: A toad with a bad infestation in the face.  
© Dr Jamie Stevens.

### Amphibian Dermocystids - we need your help!

By Charlotte Wood - Institute of Zoology



In 2006, a relatively new and unknown amphibian pathogen was found to be plaguing the palmate newt population of the Isle of Rùm, Scotland. This fungal-like Dermocystid pathogen causes skin lesions and whole body swellings which can severely debilitate infected animals. It has since been the focus of a collaborative project between the Institute of Zoology in London and the University of Edinburgh, who have been working to better understand the pathogen, the risk it poses to amphibians and the factors driving prevalence on Rùm. ARC is a CASE partner in the PhD project.



Photo top right: Severe swelling of the upper body due to advanced infection. Above: A palmate newt with several skin lesions distributed across the entire body. © IOZ

Amphibian Dermocystids are present in mainland UK, but reports are infrequent and little has been officially recorded. We are keen to expand our study and believe there is a lot to be learnt by investigating infection the UK.

We're calling on ARC and ARG volunteers to help! Please report any sightings of unusual bumps and swellings in UK newts, especially palmates, to [charlotte.wood@ioz.ac.uk](mailto:charlotte.wood@ioz.ac.uk). Photos of suspected infection would be great for diagnostics whilst additional information about your site, habitat and numbers of infected individuals would really help us to build a picture of this disease in the UK. We are particularly interested in ponds near highly acidic areas such as old mining sites for example. please feel free to get in contact with any information, ideas or to ask questions.





## TOADSIZE - The results so far...

By Dr John Wilkinson - Science Programme Manager



What is the impact of the hundreds of dedicated volunteers who go out each spring to patrol toad crossing sites? Is there any truth in anecdotal suggestions that toads at unpatrolled sites with high traffic have smaller toads (because they don't live as long)?

To start to answer these questions, ARC and ARG UK initiated the *TOADSIZE* project, where ARG groups and other toad patrollers were asked to help gather data on the size of male toads at crossing sites during spring 2013. Participants were asked to record:

- Name/location details
- Date/s of patrols
- Type of road
- Level of traffic
- Presence of toad tunnel
- Frequency of patrol
- Distance of crossing from breeding pond
- Sizes (in mm) of MALE toads – ideally 10-20 individuals per night on up to 10 crossing nights.

Clearly, fewer toads killed by traffic = more toads in the breeding population, but what did we find out from *TOADSIZE*? Well, the picture is not as simple as our initial questions might suggest.

We received results from 17 crossings and over 750 toads were measured. Analyses of the results revealed that, with the data we currently have, there doesn't appear to be a significant size difference between sites with and without toad patrols *but* sites with more frequent patrols have toads of a greater range of sizes. The distance of the crossing from the breeding pond also seems to be important. These results may indicate that toad rescues are helping preserve a good age structure in the populations where patrols occur – but it's probably too soon to be certain of the implications. *TOADSIZE* data has been collected again in 2014 and analysis of the results continues...!



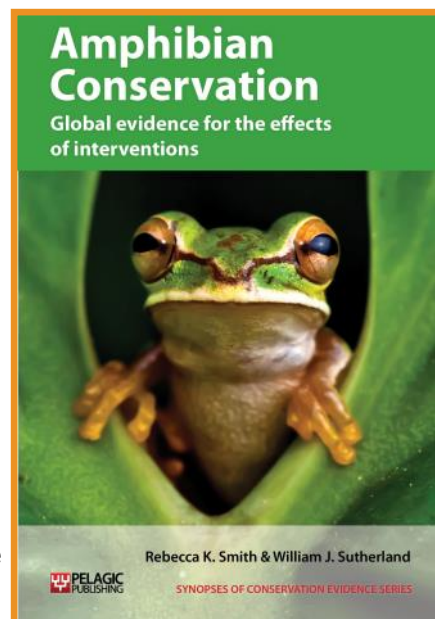
Photo: Measuring a toad  
© Dr John Wilkinson

## Synopsis of evidence on amphibian conservation. By Dr Rebecca K. Smith - University of Cambridge.



Do you make decisions about how to manage amphibians or their habitats? Have you seen the Amphibian Synopsis of conservation evidence? The recently completed synopsis summarises scientific knowledge about what works and what doesn't work. It summarises over 400 studies testing 129 possible conservation interventions for amphibians, anywhere in the world. Each study is summarised in one short paragraph and all results for one conservation intervention summarised in short key messages.

Unfortunately conservationists do not always share experience and information to help others make decisions about conservation management. That is where the Conservation Evidence project at the University of Cambridge has stepped in. We summarise evidence about the effects of conservation interventions for both habitats and species in an easily accessible format. We tell you what evidence there is (or isn't) about the effects that your planned conservation management could have. Our website is a reliable information resource designed to support your decisions about how to maintain and restore biodiversity. We have completed synopses of evidence for amphibians, bees, birds, bats and biodiversity in European farmland. Another nine synopses are underway.



The Amphibian Synopsis is freely available as a searchable database or as a pdf to download, or it can be purchased as a book from: [www.conservationevidence.com](http://www.conservationevidence.com).



### 25 years of herpetofauna conservation By Tony Gent - Chief Executive Officer



At the First World Congress of Herpetology, held in Canterbury in September 1989, Professor Ian Swingland announced the formation of the Herpetological Conservation Trust. Twenty five years on, now operating as the Amphibian & Reptile Conservation Trust, we are very much at the forefront of herpetofauna conservation in the UK and remain strongly positioned to continue this role into the future.

The HCT was founded through need; the need to have an organisation with employed staff that could focus on conserving amphibians and reptiles. Until that time there was some albeit limited interest through the statutory conservation agencies and from academic bodies, but the majority of active conservation work was taken forward by volunteers and especially through the British Herpetological Society's Conservation Committee, itself celebrating 45 years of existence this year. Through the vision and dedication of a number of individuals including Professor Ian Swingland, Jonathan Webster (ARC's current chairman) and Chris Tydeman and with the enthusiasm and generous support from the Hon. Vincent Weir, a new organisation, employing its first Conservation Officer in Keith Corbett, was born.

The 1960s and 1970s were particularly hard times for reptiles and amphibians – the impacts of agricultural intensification, massive development pressures and large scale forestry came at a time when there was little interest in conservation of reptiles and amphibians and no significant legislation to help ameliorate the impacts. Although by the time the HCT was founded legislation had been put in place, the plight of our herpetofauna, and especially the less widespread species, was dire. The HCT's first priorities were the rarest reptile species – notably sand lizard and smooth snake – with urgent projects being directed towards managing the habitats in the areas where the species still persisted. We looked to acquire nature reserves and in 1992 acquired our first – Town Common, near Christchurch in Dorset. In 1994, with completion of the Government funded Species Action Plan for natterjack, the HCT took on a natterjack conservation officer; at this time we also secured our roles as lead partner not joint lead partner for all the herpetofauna species identified for action plans through the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

Over the coming years the HCT acquired more land, through purchase and through obtaining management agreements on land owned by others, resulting in a suite of over 80 sites covering some 1500ha. Our remit expanded, with a greater focus on working with others and with detailed programmes for all of our native herpetofauna.





The Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust was launched in 2009, a new organisation but very much with its roots in The HCT. ARC was designed to work across the new broader remit that we recognised as important for conserving reptiles and amphibians into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

The rare species remain an important part of our work- with habitat management and reintroduction programmes continuing for the sand lizard, smooth snake, natterjack and, latterly, the pool frog. We still maintain a strong programme of managing nature reserves and our sites now include some new great crested newt reserves in north Wales, natterjack toad sites in Cumbria and a pool frog site in Norfolk, as well as the many southern nature reserves across Dorset, Hampshire and Surrey. We have a strong programme of science and monitoring and in particular have pioneered 'predictive mapping' as a means for filling in gaps in distributions of species such as the great crested newt. We are working closely with amphibian and reptile groups and developing joint projects such as the development of the 'Record Pool' to help with recording. And we remain active in working on policy looking at a range of issues from biodiversity conservation, water and agriculture and land-use planning' and especially through our work with Wildlife & Countryside Link. Our partnership work beyond link is important and we have undertaken a number of joint projects with other 'species NGOs' such as the RSPB, Buglife, Bat Conservation Trust and other conservation NGOs including Freshwater Habitats Trust, Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust and academic organisations including Cambridge University and the Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology (DICE) in Kent

In terms of anniversaries it was 155 years in 1859 that Dr J. E Grey first described the smooth snake in Britain. The announcement prompted the naturalist Mr F. Bond to report that he had found one some six years earlier in an area between Ringwood and Wimborne which is generally considered to be Parley Common. ARC has managed Parley Common for a number of years but this year, through the Heritage Lottery Funded 'Great Heath project' we secured the ownership of this important herpetological site.

So the last 25 years have been busy and productive and we feel confident we have made a difference. We know that the next 25 years will be different –there will be a range of new threats and of new opportunities. We certainly intend to be there to fight the corner for our amphibians and reptiles and, with the continued help of our colleagues and supporters, we'll be well placed to meet these head on.

Photos: Just some of the things we get up to! Provided by Mark Barber, Chris Dresh, Rob Free, John Buckley, Nick Moulton, Debbie Clothier, Ben Limburn, Angela Reynolds, Dorothy Driver, Jim Labisko and Dorset Wildlife Trust.







## Scotch mist and talking lizards - an update from ARC in Scotland

By Dr Pete Minting - Scottish Project Officer

I'd never run an official training event on amphibians and reptiles before, so I was approaching this spring with some trepidation. What if we don't find any animals? What if nobody turns up?

The first event was near Glasgow in March. I'd offered to train volunteers from Sustrans at a well-known site for great crested newts, which is also on the National Cycle Network (NCN). Sustrans volunteers help to monitor wildlife along sections of the NCN.

After a session on identification and recording we headed out to the ponds. It was cold but we saw smooth, palmate and great crested newts. That was it, first event in the bag! Since then, Sustrans has submitted lots of records and made some ponds by the NCN in Renfrewshire.

Next was training for the Skye Local Environment Forum (SLEF). On the way there, I visited some adder sites without success. I got to Skye early and spent the day surveying the training site. After four hours, I'd found a common toad and some frog tadpoles. I headed back for lunch.

In the car park, there was a family birdwatching. "Seen anything interesting?" I asked. "No, not really. But my daughter's seen a couple of slow worms." The family helpfully pointed out where the slow worms had been. They were not there anymore.



I kept searching. At 6pm, I spied a common lizard. I asked him why he was still basking at this time of day. "I'm trying to get rid of these ticks" he replied. I wondered if they were the same as deer ticks.

The next day the event went well. We found a slow worm and lots of palmate newts. I discussed habitat with Roger Cottis of SLEF, who has applied for funds to manage the Kinloch SSSI.

My last event of the spring was in the Borders, with the John Muir Trust and CIEEM. I showed the picture of the lizard on Skye, to which I'd added a speech bubble. "Anyone notice anything unusual?" I asked. "It's a talking lizard?" came the quick-witted reply. I pointed out the ticks, which were real. I had to admit that the talking lizard was not.

When we went out to survey there was no need to hallucinate. Within half an hour, we'd found five beautiful adders. It was a fine end to the day! Many thanks to the John Muir Trust for hosting us.

Photo top left: Training Sustrans volunteers in Glasgow © Laura White. Middle: Talking common lizard with ticks! © Pete Minting (ARC). Bottom: Training with SLEF in Kinloch © Pete Minting (ARC)







## No net loss

By Jim Foster - Conservation Director

**Choosing your garden netting wisely prevents death traps for snakes, explains ARC's Conservation Director, Jim Foster.**

This summer ARC will be expounding the virtues of gardens for our at-risk reptiles. You won't need any convincing of the value of gardens if you've ever been lucky enough to spot a snake slithering through your flower beds, or taking a dip in your pond. Yet each summer ARC receives calls from distressed householders after encountering snakes trapped in netting. Here we give you some hints on how to avoid ensnaring snakes.

So what's the problem? Many gardeners use netting to stop leaves clogging up their ponds, or to keep herons at bay. Those with green fingers use netting to protect their vegetables and soft fruit. Sadly, snakes easily get entangled in commonly used netting. What's more, if the snake can't free itself quickly – or isn't given a helping hand – it may die after exposure to heat or predators. Other wildlife suffers too – we've heard reports of hedgehogs, small birds and frogs getting caught in netting. We think that snakes are rather easily ensnared because their backward-pointing scales get caught on netting, and their long bodies mean they writhe around entangling themselves further.

The vast majority of reports concern grass snakes. That's not surprising given their wide-ranging behaviour, choice of habitats and broad distribution. Occasionally we get reports of trapped adders, though they almost always turn out to be misidentified grass snakes. It seems to be mainly larger snakes that get caught, as small animals can wriggle their way out of the mesh. Slow-worms very rarely get caught in netting, probably because their behaviour means they don't encounter it as much, and because of their size and scale type.

We've developed some simple advice by looking back at past reports for consistent patterns. It's worth following this if you know or suspect snakes in your area. Of course, the simplest answer is just to avoid using netting, but sometimes there's no avoiding it if you're a keen gardener. Our top tips are:

1. To protect your pond, use a rigid plastic or metal grille instead of plastic netting, or use thick, widely-spaced mesh pulled very taught across the pond.
2. On the veggie patch, use a safer kind of mesh. Use rigid or semi-rigid mesh. Garden centres often stock a range of metal or plastic-coated metal mesh. Chicken wire is fine. Thin, flexible nylon is the most hazardous, but if you need this then aim for a mesh size of 4cm or larger, locate it at least 15cm off the ground, and keep it taught, for example by pegging to stakes.



3. Always clear up unused netting and store it carefully where snakes can't access it. We've heard horror stories of entangled snakes, apparently after taking shelter underneath heaps of netting.

**If you're unlucky enough to hear of a trapped snake, give ARC a call for advice or contact your local wildlife hospital. If more people use these simple steps to refresh their mesh we can make ensnared snakes a thing of the past. Please promote this to your fellow gardeners and allotment holders. An advice note on this topic will be up on our website in summer.**

Photo top right: This young grass snake was severely entangled until we eased it free. The milky eyes show that it's about to shed its skin © Jim Foster. Above: Pond mesh that's taught, thick and widely spaced shouldn't entangle snakes. This photo shows how grass snakes can even use it for basking over ponds © Wendy Redman.



**Want to buy yourself a little something or a gift for a loved one, and raise money for herp conservation at the same time? Well, now you can with British Wildlife Gifts!**



British Wildlife Gifts creator Jo Richards has been a volunteer in amphibian and reptile conservation for many years serving on the Kent Amphibian & Reptile Group Committee and is now in charge of publicity on the ARG UK Panel. Jo launched her range of amphibian and reptile mugs at the Herpetofauna Workers Meeting at Bristol Zoo in February where British Wildlife Gifts was also a sponsor.

Each mug costs £6.00 and you can choose to donate anything from £2 - £25 to either ARG UK or ARC. The current range includes the adder, natterjack toad, great crested newt and the sand lizard.



To buy one of these fantastic mugs visit [www.britishwildlifegifts.co.uk](http://www.britishwildlifegifts.co.uk).



## Habitat Management on Sefton Coast

By Nick Moulton - Reptile Conservation Officer

During February 2014 scrub management was continued on priority sites in Sefton to ensure that sites supporting sand lizard and natterjack toad are in favourable condition. The programmed management has been via an ongoing partnership with Sefton Council's Coast & Countryside Team, Natural England, ARC and ARG UK local groups, including North Merseyside, South Lancashire, South West Wales and North West Wales Amphibian and Reptile Group.

Management has been successfully completed at multiple sites including tree and scrub management, removal or burning of cut material and chemical stump treatment. The majority of these sites were prioritised as they are generally isolated, relatively small and more liable to vegetation succession and therefore have a higher chance of population loss without management intervention.



It is very encouraging that all groups contributed to help, including work parties from some distance which has been tremendously successful. In June this year 11 female sand lizards have already been spotted! We hope to jointly continue the management in further years and initiate sand management and further monitoring throughout the year. ARC is also assessing, with all partners, the possibility of a funded herpetofauna post for the Sefton Coast to assist with species regional plans, monitoring, habitat management and re-introductions.

Photos: Above right: Natterjack toad slack Left: ARC & North Merseyside ARG members working hard. © Nick Moulton.





## Working with Natterjacks - Joint ARC & Field Studies Council Course 2014

By John Buckley - Amphibian Conservation Officer

Thousands of small black tadpoles; scores of calling males; females crawling towards the breeding pools: was all this entirely due to the calm warm evening after a rainy day, or had the Haverigg toads decided to put on a particularly special showing for the 4<sup>th</sup> ARC/FSC course in Cumbria?

Held on 24<sup>th</sup> April this year, the training course followed a well established format. Firstly, ARC staff Ruth Popely, Pete Minting and myself presented topics including: autecology; habitats and their conservation; the recognition of spawn, tadpoles and adults; and the impact of chytrid fungus (*Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis*). We then invited participants to engage in the enjoyable task of examining and identifying the life stages of frogs and toads collected from different local ponds. This we followed with a picture quiz - photographs taken in the field - so as to prepare everyone for the evening's exercise.



Next came a fortifying meal at the Bridge Café and finally a forage into natterjack country. We drew a blank at the Iron Works where we found only common toad, common frog tadpoles and smooth newts. But at the Stoop Dub Higher Level Stewardship scrapes we soon discovered tiny, free-swimming natterjack tadpoles and fresh spawn. Then it was up and over the dunes to the frontal ridge for a chance to spot natterjack burrows, excavate the inhabitants, measure them and determine their gender.

As dusk fell the first natterjacks appeared on the sand, as if from nowhere, crawling towards the beach pools in anticipation of the breeding frenzy that would ensue once it became fully dark. A memorable finale to the day's activities.

Photo top right: Steve Hall measuring a toad © John Buckley (ARC). Above right: Night survey © John Buckley (ARC). Below: An adult female natterjack toad © Anthony Wainwright.





# Species Profile

## Grass Snake (Natrix natrix)



Above. Grass snake. Photo: Howard Inns

### Behaviour

- Grass snakes can be found basking around edges of open spaces early in the day, particularly in spring/early summer.
- Although non-venomous and rarely a snake to bite, they can put on an aggressive defence, inflating the body and hissing
- If handled, Grass snakes may release a foul smelling liquid, and can also pretend to be dead.



Above. Grass snake playing dead.  
Photo: Fred Holmes

### Breeding

- Normally mate around April, having emerged a month earlier.
- During mating, a "mating ball" is formed where males and a female writhe around to form a suitable mating position.
- Eggs are usually laid in rotting vegetation, such as compost heaps, in batches of 10-40 depending on the size of the female.
- Incubation lasts for 2-3 months and eggs hatch around September.

### Habitat

- Grass snakes can often be found around grassland, heathland and woodland near bodies of fresh water, and can often be seen swimming in ponds.
- As with many snakes, they can also be found around the edges of open areas, such as paths through heathland.
- Eggs may be found in compost heaps or manure piles.



Above. Grass snake. Photo: Jerry Stanley

### Appearance/ colour

- Adults are 70-100cm.
- Typically have an olive-green body (however sometimes green-grey or brownish) with vertical black blotches or 'bars' spaced along the sides of the body.
- Distinctive collar, consisting of two yellow/cream patches, with a black crescent shaped mark behind it.
- Underside is chequered white and black
- Male and female are similar, although females are significantly larger.
- Face has narrow black lines below the eye on each side of the head.
- Very rarely, a melanistic, fully black, grass snake can be found.

Right. Juvenile grass snake.

Photo: Chris Glead-Owen  
Below. Grass snake with eggs.

Photo: Neal Armour-Chelu





**Nathan Bach** from Derbyshire is eight years old and a member of Wildlife Watch; the junior arm of the Wildlife Trusts. Nathan is particularly fond of the great crested newt and has written this poem as part of his 'Shout About It Challenge! This will form part of the work needed in order to achieve his Kestrel Award with Wildlife Watch. Along with his father, Nathan is creating a wildlife pond in his garden to attract these enigmatic creatures who are already present in the area he lives in.

**Neill Talbot**, Lead Conservation Officer at the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust, is someone that Nathan really admires and he recently joined him for a night time newt survey which could only be described as 'Epic!'

## I'm a Great Crested Newt!

I must state  
That I am great,  
I have a crest,  
I'm simply the best.  
Oh yes - I'm a Great Crested Newt!

I am brownish black,  
With warts all over my back,  
My orange tum has black spots  
It looks just like join-the-dots.  
Oh my - I'm a Great Crested Newt!

If I lose a toe or a leg  
Another one grows instead,  
My spots on my tum  
Are different for everyone.  
Oh wow - I'm a Great Crested Newt!

Being an amphibian is great,  
I can move on any substrate,  
Beneath rocks I sleep  
And under compost heaps.  
Oh yawn - I'm a Great Crested Newt!

In Winter when the year is late,  
I need to hibernate,  
In Spring I awake  
And to water I take.  
Oh gulp - I'm a Great Crested Newt!

I do a dance when I mate,  
The females think I am great!  
Up to 300 eggs are laid,  
Not all hatch though, I'm afraid.  
Oh boy - I'm a Great Crested Newt!

I have to be careful of fish  
As I make them a tasty dish,  
I come out at night  
As earthworms I bite,  
Oh yum - I'm a Great Crested Newt!



Photos © Chris Dresh

Being a newt is cool!  
I might live in your pool.  
But please don't touch  
I'm rare as such.  
Oh dear - I'm a Great Crested Newt!

My species is protected  
So I must not be collected  
Look after me  
Or there won't be  
Any Great Crested Newts!



**Thanks Nathan, we all agree that great crested newts are fantastic creatures! Well done on a brilliant poem! Keep your stories, pictures and poems coming - tell us about your favourite frog or your encounters with snakes in the wild. We would love to hear about them and you could be featured in the next issue of Hop Gossip!**



**RECORD POOL**  
Amphibian and Reptile Groups of the UK  
VOLUNTEERS WORKING FOR THE CONSERVATION OF AMPHIBIANS AND REPTILES

Don't forget to use the Record Pool to record your amphibian & reptile sightings. Its really easy to use. Find out more at

[www.recordpool.org.uk](http://www.recordpool.org.uk)



## Sasha Says...

Open spaces including heathland provide great areas to exercise our owners. Here are a few tips to ensure that everyone stays safe and has a great time!

**Keep to paths.** This helps to conserve heathland by not disturbing wildlife. Heathland is home to adders and ticks. I know that if I was unfortunate enough to get bitten by an adder for being too nosy my Mum would take me straight to the vets where I would receive immediate attention. I get the odd tick but you can buy small plastic tick removers from your vets or over the internet and remove them very easily.

**Follow requests on signs.** These are there to guide you and help protect the heath year round. During parts of the year there may be restricted access. I can't read but luckily my mum can. Stay safe from habitat management works by following the signs.



**Respect other visitors and keep your dog in sight.** Some people and dogs are nervous or frightened around dogs. I love people but it's important to ask before letting your dog approach other dogs and people. If your dog doesn't like coming back when called it's probably best to keep them on a lead so that you always know where they are and that they're safe.



**Keep your canine friends on a lead from February to August.** This is the ground nesting bird season. Rare birds like the nightjar and woodlark like to nest in undisturbed areas. Even friendly dogs like me can scare the birds off of their nests leaving eggs or chicks exposed to the cold and to predators.

**Bag it and bin it!** Please pick up after your pet and use the bins provided. Doggy do increases nutrients in the soil which allows common plants to invade and displace the rare species that makes the heath so special. Cleaning up also helps to prevent the spread of diseases that can affect dogs, grazing animals and people as well as keeping the paths clean. No one enjoys stepping in doggy do!



**Please close gates after you.** Don't let your dog chase or disturb wildlife, grazing animals and other visitors. If you do find yourself being chased by livestock let your furry friend off of the lead so that you can both escape. Don't forget to report any injured livestock using the contact number given on the site notice boards.

Information taken from Dorset Dogs 'Doggy Do Code.' [www.dorsetdogs.org.uk](http://www.dorsetdogs.org.uk)



## Can you spot the basking reptile?



There are many ways you can help us to help amphibians and reptiles up and down the country. You can make purchases through our shop [www.arc-trust.org/support-us/shop](http://www.arc-trust.org/support-us/shop) or raise money using one of the methods below.



We are running a Jewellery Recycling Collection scheme via Recycling for Good Causes. Just use the enclosed envelope and everything you send is turned in to cash for ARC.



GiveACar is a social enterprise that raises money for charity by accepting donations of old cars. If you have an old car that you don't want, just give GiveACar a call. Every car has a value, whether it's roadworthy or only good for scrap. They take your details, arrange the collection, send round a tow truck, either scrap the car or sell it at auction, and make a donation to the charity of your choice. It's a free service and it's that simple – they do all the work for you.



Hold a fundraising dress down day at work or install a swear/naughty box and drop in a coin whenever you have been naughty! Organise a sponsored swim or bike ride or join us as a volunteer. For more information on volunteering see our website [www.arc-trust.org/get-involved/volunteering](http://www.arc-trust.org/get-involved/volunteering).

### Crossword answers from the last issue.

#### ACROSS

4. You should build one of these in your garden (**pond**)
5. You find this on a grass snake (**collar**)
7. How many kinds of newt do we have (**three**)
9. The colour of a natterjack toads stripe (**yellow**)
10. You might find grass snakes here! (**compost heap**)
11. Reptiles have these, but not amphibians (**scales**)
14. Colour of a great crested newts belly (**orange**)

#### DOWN

1. Our only venomous snake (**adder**)
2. Legless lizard (**slow worm**)
3. Reptiles do this on sunny days (**bask**)
6. To shed skin (**slough**)
8. What amphibians and reptiles do in winter (**hibernate**)
11. One of our lizards needs this to lay its eggs (**sand**)
12. Frogs and toads lay this (**spawn**)
13. Could turn in to a prince (**frog**)

# amphibian and reptile conservation



Amphibian and Reptile Conservation is a national wildlife charity striving for a world where amphibians and reptiles are safeguarded for future generations. With over 25 years experience in the wildlife sector we are committed to the conservation of frogs, toads, newts, snakes and lizards and the habitats on which they depend.

To find out more or to support Amphibian and Reptile Conservation contact:

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## Become a Friend!

Join Amphibian and Reptile Conservation today and help us give a voice to the UK's amphibians and reptiles - saving species, improving habitats and enhancing lives in the process. It costs as little as £15 a year.

Join online:  
**[www.arc-trust.org/support](http://www.arc-trust.org/support)**

Or call **01202 391319**  
(9:00am - 5:00pm, Monday - Friday)

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