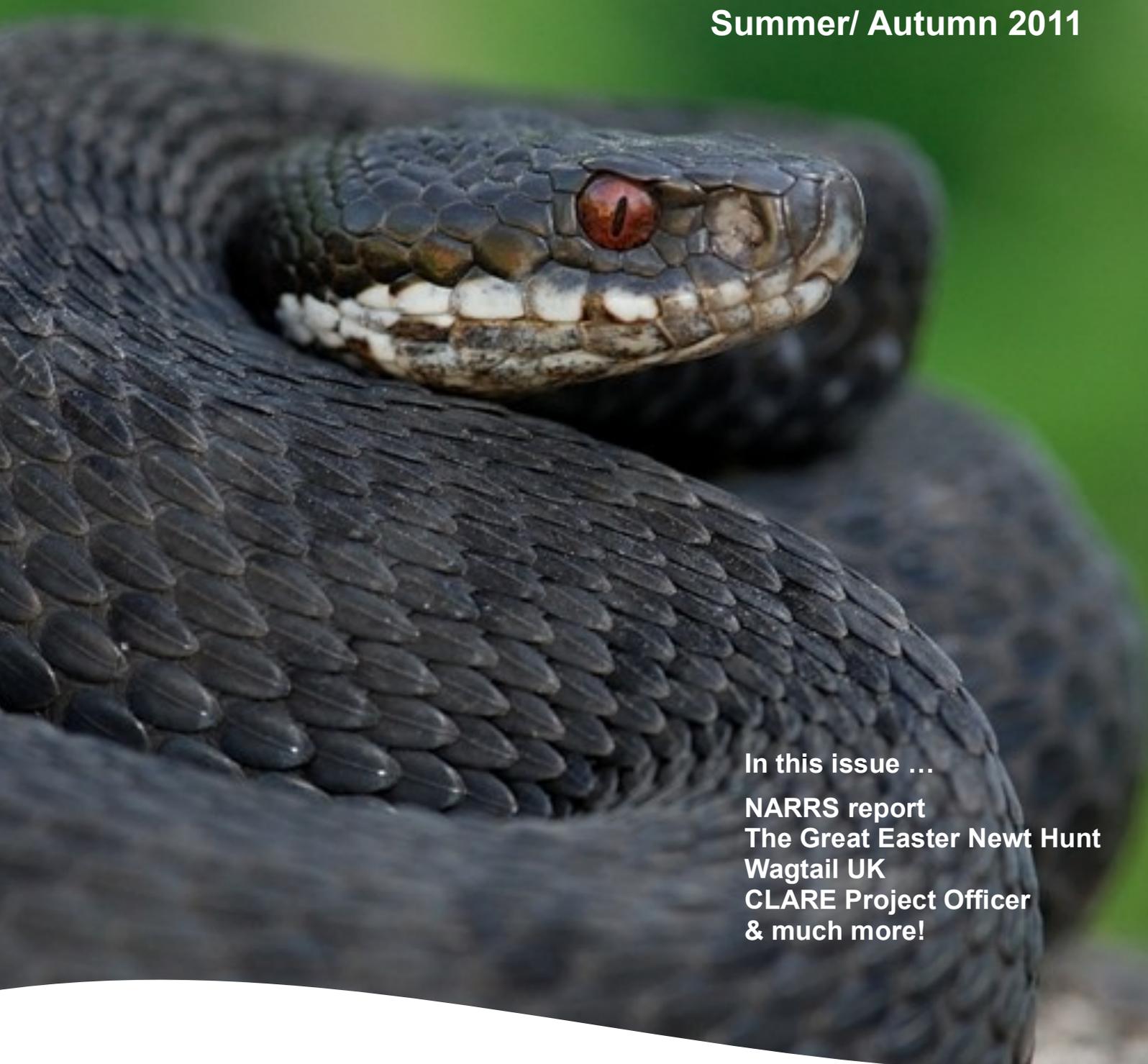


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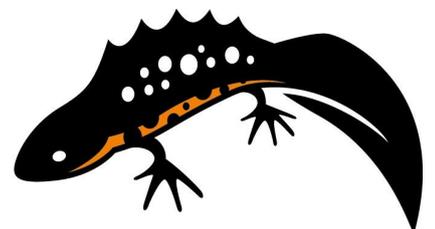
Summer/ Autumn 2011



In this issue ...

NARRS report
The Great Easter Newt Hunt
Wagtail UK
CLARE Project Officer
& much more!

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

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If you would like to contribute to the next edition please contact Angela Reynolds at angela.reynolds@arc-trust.org

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Cover image: Adder (*Vipera berus*).
Photo: © Paul Stevens
Hop Gossip is edited and designed by
Angela Reynolds

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From the Editors desk

Welcome to the latest edition of Hop Gossip!

Love is in the air this year at ARC. I have double congratulations to hand out! Our Weald Reserves Manager Rob Free and his fiancé Maggie are getting married in July and Dorothy Wright our Species Coordinator and GCN Officer is getting married to Ben Driver in September. Best of luck to all!

We have been very busy here at ARC since the last issue of Hop Gossip! There is lots to read about in this edition.

This issues feature is about the results of the first three years of NARRS survey data. The results are very interesting and at times surprising. It clearly demonstrates the need for sufficient data which allows us to investigate causes of decline and ensure species' survival into the future.

On a lighter note I met Louise Wilson at the Herpetofauna Workers Meeting in January who is the founder and Director of Conservation Dogs. Her article on page 8 is well worth a read!

We have been doing lots on the amphibian front including getting involved in 'The Big Swab' (see page 9) and the results of 'The Great Easter Newt Hunt' are in. You can see them on page 15.

I hope you all have a great summer and whilst you are out enjoying the garden spare a thought for our native herps and consider ways to make your garden an inviting habitat for them to enjoy.

With best wishes,

Angela



Angela Reynolds
Hop Gossip Editor
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C.E.O.'s Corner Dr. Tony Gent



Every year there seems to be something odd about the weather – this year, for much of the country, spring was fairly dry; confusing both amphibians and amphibian watchers alike. We normally wait for that first wet spell in late February/ March (depending where you live) to draw out common toads in larger numbers to head to their breeding ponds. This year the 'Toad Crossing Signs' were out at my local toad 'hot spot' but activity was remarkably low – then a late flush of rain in early May suddenly started amphibians rushing all over the place.

So too with reptiles – our surveyors are reporting that with the hot dry start to the year the weather is making them harder to see, and is bringing with it the threat of fires that are so damaging to our reptile populations. We are all used to these vagaries – the variations in weather that make drawing the 'annual life cycle diagrams' in our handbooks so tricky to do – but this all highlights just how 'weather dependent' our amphibians and reptiles are and how much the prevailing conditions affect all aspects of their lives. In turn this makes us wonder exactly how they will respond to climate change and how this will affect the herpetofauna in our back garden.

As the animals begin their new season of activity, work at ARC and the activities of people involved with amphibian and reptile conservation also shifts its emphasis. During the winter months our 'direct conservation action' tends to be focused on the larger scale work such as scrub and tree management and pond creation and restoration, both on our nature reserves and on land owned and managed by others; as spring turns to summer we become more involved in survey and other forms of management such as controlling bracken or creating open ground for sand lizard egg-laying or firebreaks.

However, much of our other work is driven by other pressures, including the timetables of Government departments and their initiatives. We are awaiting the launch of two major biodiversity initiatives in England – the publishing of the 'Natural Environment White Paper' and the latest England Biodiversity Strategy. These collectively will set the Government's biodiversity conservation agenda and how they see it being taken forward. We are also awaiting the outcome of the consultations to develop a new Natural Environment Framework in Wales and a Land Use Strategy in Scotland, and to see the impact that these will have on nature conservation practice in these countries. By this time next year we may see a very different approach to nature conservation across the UK. It is likely that we will see a greater emphasis on 'ecosystems' both in terms of the scale at which conservation is taken forward and on the value that such systems provide to society, such as flood control, carbon capture and providing areas for recreation. We need to be cautious about how this may affect our herpetofauna. We are also working with other NGOs to try to positively influence the outcome of Governmental reviews of regulations governing the environment and the 'Red Tape Challenge'. While some simplification may be beneficial, we are stressing that good regulation is essential for nature conservation.

And just as we go to press we are about to embark on a new project in London run jointly with the London Wildlife Trust, London's environmental records centre (GiGL) and the London Amphibian & Reptile Group. Funded for one year by the Heritage Lottery Fund, our Connecting London's Amphibian and Reptile Environments (CLARE) project is looking to find out more about the distribution of herpetofauna across the capital and give more people in London the opportunity to learn more about them.

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New CLARE Project Officer in post

In the last issue of Hop Gossip we reported that we were successful in a bid to The Heritage Lottery Fund for a year long project in London called CLARE (Connecting London's Amphibian & Reptile Environments). The project involves working with the London Wildlife Trust and GiGL (Greenspace information for Greater London). The campaign will involve wide public participation and education in wildlife recording and will raise the profile and understanding of reptiles and amphibians and their distribution within Greater London. Interviews for the post took place earlier this year and we are delighted to introduce Sophie Hinton, our CLARE Project Officer.

Hello everybody! I'm very excited to introduce myself as Sophie, the CLARE Project Officer and the newest member of ARC's team. After studying Biology as an undergraduate at the University of Leeds, I went on to gain a Masters degree in Biodiversity and Conservation. I developed a thorough appreciation of all aspects of wildlife conservation but it was my research in Belize which sparked my passion for amphibians and reptiles in particular. I spent some time researching two understudied and endangered frog species in the tropical forest in an attempt to understand the reasons for their decline in number.

Before CLARE, I worked for the Avon Wildlife Trust, motivating the public to take action for wildlife and assisting in efforts to guide wildlife conservation planning and policy. From my experience, amphibians and reptiles suffer from having a much lower public profile than some of our other native animal groups. With the CLARE Project, I want to achieve new heights by raising public awareness and understanding of herpetofauna in the London region. I look forward to the busy year ahead; collecting data, creating new habitats and inspiring people to take action for amphibians and reptiles, ultimately contributing to their conservation for years to come.



Amphibian Habitat Management Handbook - Now available!

Amphibian Habitat Management Handbook



John Baker, Trevor Beebee, John Buckley, Tony Gent and David Orchard

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Production of the Amphibian Habitat Management Handbook was funded by the Esmeé Fairbairn Foundation as part of Amphibian and Reptile Conservation's Widespread Species Project.

The seven amphibian species native to Great Britain present a range of conservation challenges and opportunities. Most of these species are widely distributed and two of these, the great crested newt and common toad, are listed as priorities under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP). The natterjack toad and pool frog are also conservation priorities due to their rarity.

The handbook is a resource for a range of people involved in amphibian conservation including site managers, community groups, government staff, ecological consultants and volunteers.

This ARC publication draws upon over twenty years of knowledge gained managing habitat for rare amphibians. It also benefits from the collective experience of the UK herpetofauna conservation community including Amphibian & Reptile Groups, site managers and dedicated individuals.

Copies are available from ARC at £3.00 (for postage and packaging.) Bulk orders can be negotiated at enquiries@arc-trust.org. It is also available to download in PDF format at www.arc-trust.org.

ARC in the media

After the findings of the recent NARRS report (see feature on pages 10 - 11) we had a flurry of media activity who picked up on the fact that adders (*Vipera berus*) and common toads (*Bufo bufo*) are in decline.

Dr John Wilkinson (ARC's Research & Monitoring Officer) did numerous regional radio interviews and also some filming for the BBC Earth News website to talk about the decline in amphibians & reptiles. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/earth/hi/earth_news/newsid_9405000/9405801.stm

Former ARC Dorset Reserves Community Officer Rowland Griffin and ARC Dorset Field Officer Chris Dresh spent a very long day (in less than ideal weather) searching for adders to film for BBC's The One Show. Patience and perseverance paid off in the end!

Gary Powell (ARC's Senior Reserves Manager) spent the day with BBC Newsround, much to his young sons delight, filming for 'Leah's Wild Five!'

Chris Dresh was also called upon to catch a sand lizard (*Lacerta agilis*) from one of our reserves for Chris Packham's TV series 'The truth about wildlife.' The lizard then went on to Avon Heath Country Park to become part of the sand lizard captive breeding programme.



Chris Packham with male sand lizard



Filming for 'The One Show.'



Filming for 'Newsround.'

Photos: Chris Dresh (ARC)

Species Officer for Wales

Mark Barber, a graduate of Swansea University and based in Swansea, is just coming to the end of his spell as ARC's Species Officer for Wales. Funding was secured from the Vodafone World of Difference UK programme, which provides the opportunity for applicants to work for a UK charity of their choice for two months. Mark applied to work for ARC and out of the 11,000+ applications he was one of the lucky 500 to receive sponsorship. The position involved promoting ARC and the conservation of reptiles and amphibians at shows and local events within Wales.



Mark in the field.

As well as promoting herps, Mark has been providing training in identification and survey techniques and habitat management for members of the public and wildlife conservation organisations. Furthermore his role included assessing the status of the widespread species (including the protected great crested newt) using computer modelling. Survey work is being undertaken with local volunteers to ground truth the models' predictions.

Mark will be writing an article about his time with ARC for the next edition of Hop Gossip but until then you can follow Mark on his blog, see <http://worldofdifference.vodafone.co.uk/blogs/mark-barber/> and Twitter <http://twitter.com/#!/ARCTrustWales><http://twitter.com/#!/ARCTrustWales>

Hop off the Press!

In the field



Sand Management

By Chris Dresh - Dorset Field Officer

The sand management programme usually takes place during the first two weeks of May. At this time of year, reptiles are out of hibernation but the ground nesting birds haven't started to lay eggs and the sand lizards haven't started to burrow.

Sand lizards (*Lacerta agilis*) require bare sand with a sunny aspect to lay a clutch of around 6-10 eggs in. These hatch 7-10 weeks later. New areas of bare sand are created, or previously created patches are maintained, to keep them open and prevent them from healing over. Some areas are purposefully left to heal over as this benefits a large amount of invertebrate species that also require a similar sandy habitat.



Female sand lizard burrowing.
Photo: Nick Moulton (ARC)



As this year's program progressed, it became apparent that time was against us. Due to the unusually warm and dry March and April, the emergence of all the reptile species was slightly early, allowing sand lizard courtship to take place earlier than usual. Burrowing normally starts at the end of May but this year reports were coming in during the first week of May. Also accompanied by unseasonably hot spring months is, of course, the risk of fires and the strips can also be utilised as fire breaks. All the areas of new sand created are carried out on pre-mown areas and this is done in the winter months to make the impact on reptile and bird species minimal.

'Blading.' Photo: Chris Dresh (ARC)

We used a whole range of different techniques this year, ranging from simple hand turfed sand patches to the maintenance of existing areas using a tractor mounted rotovator. The creation of new extensive areas was achieved by a tractor and a mounted blade.

On completion of this year's programme 4.14 miles of sand have been maintained and 2.31 miles of new sand has been created on a total of fifteen Dorset reserves. This is just in time as it seems like a real possibility of a two-clutch year. Let's hope so!



Crooksbury Common

By Rob Free - Weald Reserves Manager

Crooksbury Common is owned by Guildford Borough Council. Many years ago it was leased to the Forestry Commission so that timber might be grown on what was seen at the time as valueless heathland. By the time the British Herpetological Society's Conservation Committee first surveyed the site in the early 1970s only a very small relict of heathland remained on a dry, south-facing slope where Scots pines and other planted conifers were faring less well. Surprisingly, on this heathland patch of no more than an acre, smooth snakes were discovered. Over many years, the Committee, and later ARC, restored and extended the heathland working closely with the Forestry Commission. The Commission generously added more and more land to ARC's management agreement area as plantation was harvested; and now we are managing almost 20 hectares of good quality heathland habitat. The site was designated a SSSI in 1986 (Puttenham and Crooksbury Commons), although the designated area is smaller than the area of heathland ARC manages due to subsequent restoration work.

ARC has re-introduced sand lizards and natterjack toads to Crooksbury over the years. The sand lizards have fared very well and are present in good numbers throughout the site. The natterjacks have



Digging a scrape. Photo: Rob Free (ARC)

struggled, despite the presence of two purpose-made concrete saucer ponds and one larger pond in the natural sand substrate. So, in April 2011 three additional saucer ponds were dug in a wet part of the heath and the existing large pond was re-profiled to provide extensive shallow areas. This will give the natterjacks a greater range of good quality breeding ponds (some of the old ponds have unfortunately become Labrador bathing areas and are rather too turbid). This work was generously grant aided by the Million Ponds Project.

Crooksbury Common is open access land and is located at grid SU888455 about 3 miles east of Farnham, Surrey.



The same scrape filling naturally with rain water. Photo: Rob Free (ARC)



Habitat management for natterjacks in Cumbria

By Bill Shaw - Cumbria Natterjack Officer

Cumbria is the stronghold of the natterjack toad in the UK and, because of this, a lot of effort has gone in over the years to bolster and expand the populations within the county.

In the majority of cases, the habitat management work is fairly routine, involving creating new breeding pools or improving existing pools by clearing encroaching scrub (which tends to favour the common toad, a competitor to the Natterjack). Last winter, however, ARC undertook a rather different task on the Grune Peninsula near Silloth in North Cumbria. We are very grateful to the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty's (AONB) Sustainable Development Fund who funded the project.

The job involved enlisting the help of volunteers from the Solway Coast AONB and a digger! The problem that needed addressing was that two breeding pools were being inundated with salt water during very high tides, which occur about five times a year in the spring and autumn. The tide was getting in because there was a low section in a shingle ridge (see photo 1) and the task was to fill this in. Natterjacks, like other amphibians, can tolerate a little bit of salinity, but these pools were just too salty.

It was a great day's work, which involved a lot of both physical and mental effort along the way. The series of photos show the three stage process: filling the gap with shingle, covering it with turves so as to consolidate it, and then staking down chicken wire on the top so as to hold it in place until the turves knit together to form a continuous mat.

In the natterjack world, breeding success is gauged by whether they spawn in a pool in the spring, and whether we find toadlets, the proof of successful metamorphosis. So far this season, spawn has been laid in the pools. So we've achieved partial success. Fingers crossed for toadlets!



1. Tidal Breach, 2. Filling the gap with shingle, 3. Laying the turves on the top, 4. Staking down the chicken wire. (Above right) The work party. All Photos: Bill Shaw (ARC)

Conservation Detection Dogs

By Louise Wilson - Wagtail UK Ltd



Louise in Africa - training dogs to detect cheetah scat.

Conservation Dogs is the first UK based dog training organisation to pioneer the concept of using detection dogs to sniff out rare animal species, and their signs (scats or droppings or carcasses or nests), in the field to aid researchers in their goals of ecological research, management and conservation.

The dogs' incredible sense of smell and their ability to discern individual scents, even when they are masked by other odours, are some of the reasons why Louise Wilson, founder and director of Conservation Dogs, started to diversify into the area of conservation.

Conservation Dogs is also proving highly successful for a growing number of commercial organisations. For example, a pest control company keen to establish its 'green credentials' has turned to dogs to sniff out entry and exit points for problem mice infestation cases. Other organisations that are keen to establish the extent of bat mortalities through certain physical impacts can use dogs to sniff out the small carcasses. Hotels and hospitals could soon be able to enlist the support of these conservation dogs in sniffing out problems such as bed bugs.

Wildlife research and monitoring projects

Wildlife detection dogs have been used for many years and the literature records successful and safe detection of animals including: desert tortoise, kiwi, kakapo, brown tree snake and seals. Conservation Dog's 2011 project is to train the first great crested newt detection dog. This innovative and pioneering project is to offer ecologists and conservationists a new tool to use in assessing great crested newt presence and to assist in increasing the number of relocations of this species from one area to another, either for development or conservation purposes. We are undergoing licensing and qualifications required to work with great crested newts and ecologists.



(Above) Luna - pine marten scat detection dog.

Conservation detection dogs are a non-invasive and non-biased search method to use in detecting elusive animals, particularly those in low abundance. As well as being capable of detecting animal nests and dens in a safe and efficient way, there is minimal disturbance to the animals themselves.



Twister - bat detection dog.

(Below) Great crested newt detection dog in training



Archie - the mice detection dog trained for pest control giants Mitie with Helen Evans, Louise Wilson - Head of Training, Rhiannon Atkin and handler Alan Johnson.

If you're interested in using conservation dogs for your project please contact us

Conservation Dogs is a Trading name of Wagtail UK Ltd

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Road salt implicated in mass mortality of great crested newts

By Katie Colvile (Zoological Society of London)

In late March 2010, approximately 75 great crested newt carcasses were found in a railway station car park in Cumbria; the newts appeared to have died during their spring migration from nearby hibernation sites on their way to a large breeding pond behind the station. Road salt had been laid in the car park two weeks previously, during an unusually late period of freezing weather, and there was circumstantial evidence that residual road salt in the car park had caused these newt deaths. The incident was recently described in the Veterinary Record (Duff, J. P., Colvile, K., Foster, J., Dumphreys, N. Mass mortality of great crested newts [*Triturus cristatus*] on ground treated with road salt. Veterinary Record 168 (10) p.282). There are a few anecdotal reports of UK amphibian mortality associated with road salting.



Photo: Katie Colvile (ZSL)

As in this case, incidents tend to occur when an unusually late period of freezing weather is swiftly followed by much milder temperatures. We would like to raise awareness of the apparent potential for road salt to negatively impact amphibians, and recommend that judicious caution is exercised in the use of road salt near amphibian migration routes, particularly in March and April; road maintenance contractors should be aware of this risk. We would be interested to hear about any future incidents of suspected salt poisoning: please email amphibian@zsl.org.

The Big Swab 2011

With funding from Defra, scientists from the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) have been working with volunteers from the Amphibian & Reptile Groups of the UK (ARG UK) and ARC this spring to swab more than 6,000 amphibians. The swabs will determine whether or not the killer fungal infection chytrid (*Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis*) is present in populations across the UK.



The non-native chytrid fungus causes the disease chytridiomycosis and thickens the skin of amphibians which prevents the transfer of vital salts across it. The skin itself acts as an organ which is used to drink and also to breathe. The disease was discovered in 1998 by an international team of scientists led by ZSL. It is thought to have originated in Africa when African clawed frogs were being used for pregnancy testing. These frogs were exported for use in labs all over the world.

More than 200 ponds will be surveyed between April and June this year which is double the amount of ponds that were visited in 2008. Volunteers have been taking DNA samples from 30 amphibians at each site by swabbing common toads, natterjack toads, all three species of native newts and any non-native species encountered such as the alpine newt and marsh frog. The samples will be analysed in ZSL's laboratories to check for the chytrid fungus.

"Chytrid has had devastating effects on amphibian populations across the globe, even causing some species to become extinct. It is essential that we understand where the fungus occurs in the UK so that we can identify the toads and newts that are under threat from succumbing to the disease" said Freya Smith, scientific coordinator of the survey at ZSL.



(Above left) Swabbing a newt.
Photo: Dorothy Wright (ARC)
(Above) ARC staff and Jon Crewe during one of the swabbing days.
Photo: John Buckley (ARC)

NARRS so far...

By Dr. John Wilkinson - Research & Monitoring Officer
& Andy Arnell - GIS & Data Officer



In the last issue of Hop Gossip, we showed you a table with a sneak preview of the first batch of The National Amphibian and Reptile Recording Scheme (NARRS) data, received from surveys carried out between 2007 and 2009. The full report is now available from the ARC website, see http://www.arc-trust.org/downloads/NARRS_Report_2007-2009.pdf

There was quite a lot of media interest in the report, following the information that the adder is now our rarest widespread (and most threatened!) reptile, with our Research and Monitoring Officer, Dr John Wilkinson, doing some 16 or so radio interviews in the course of two days! Reaction, however, was mixed, with some reporters showing concern for their local adders with others wondering what the fuss was about – and some even suggesting that it might be a good thing! ARC staff took care to talk about the value of adders to the ecosystem - both as predators and for their intrinsic value – and to say that declines in adders reflect the greater problems with habitat loss and connectivity that are occurring in many parts of the UK. If you compare the maps below, you'll see that adders were recorded in very few NARRS squares, especially compared to grass snakes, though adders can be found much further north (into Scotland).

It should also be noted that, although grass snakes are our commonest snake, they come only third in NARRS Reptile Surveys after common lizards and slow-worms – so we should probably be concerned about grass snakes too! As a wide-ranging animal of the British countryside (they are the most mobile of our herpetofauna), we might expect them to be able to find patches of suitable habitat in most areas. But they are almost certainly suffering from loss of suitable habitat, including hibernation and egg-laying sites, too, as well as from the loss of toad populations (which are important as prey) in central and southern Lowland England.

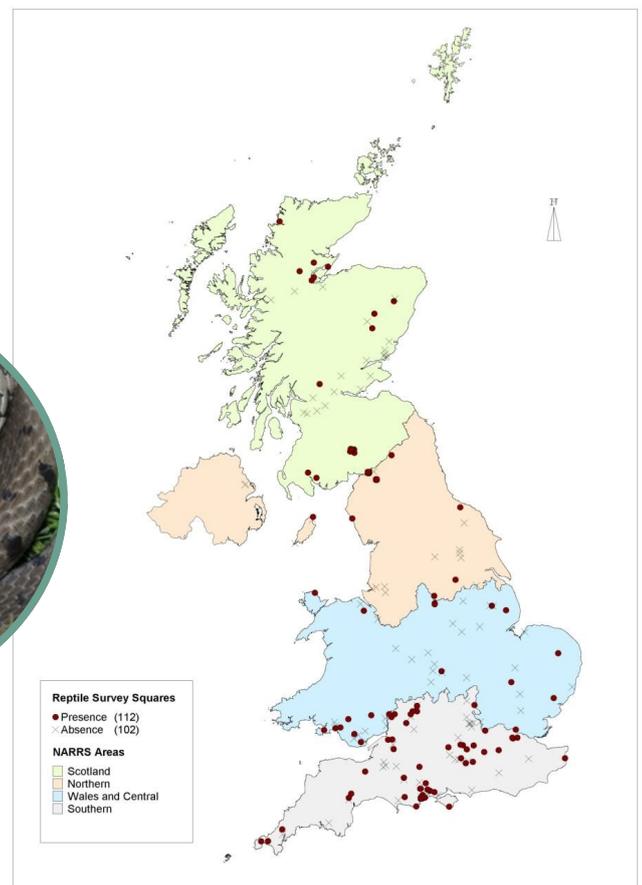


The adder (*Vipera berus*) is now by far our rarest widespread reptile. Photo: Chris Dresh (ARC)

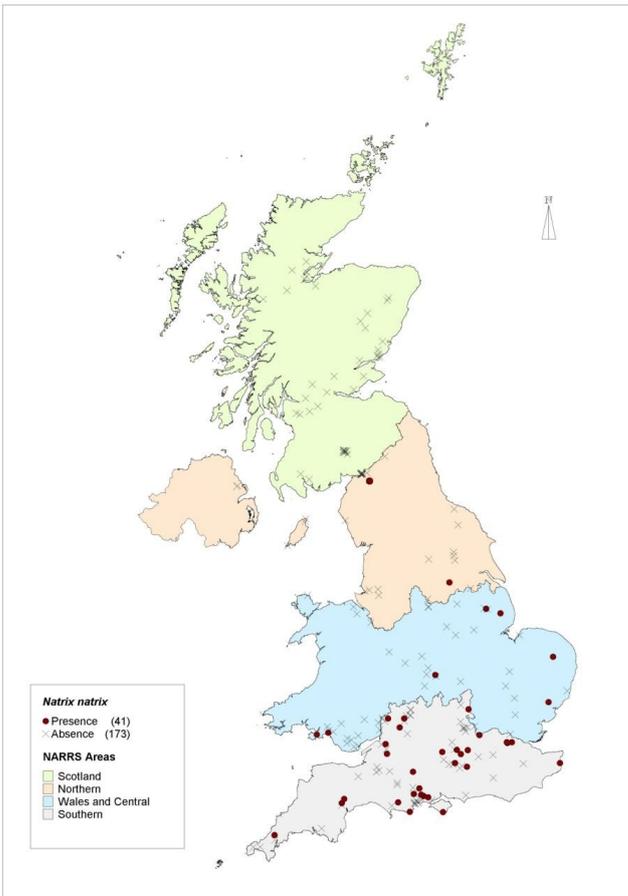
The grass snake (*Natrix natrix*) is our most common snake but should we be concerned about them too? Photo: Chris Dresh (ARC)



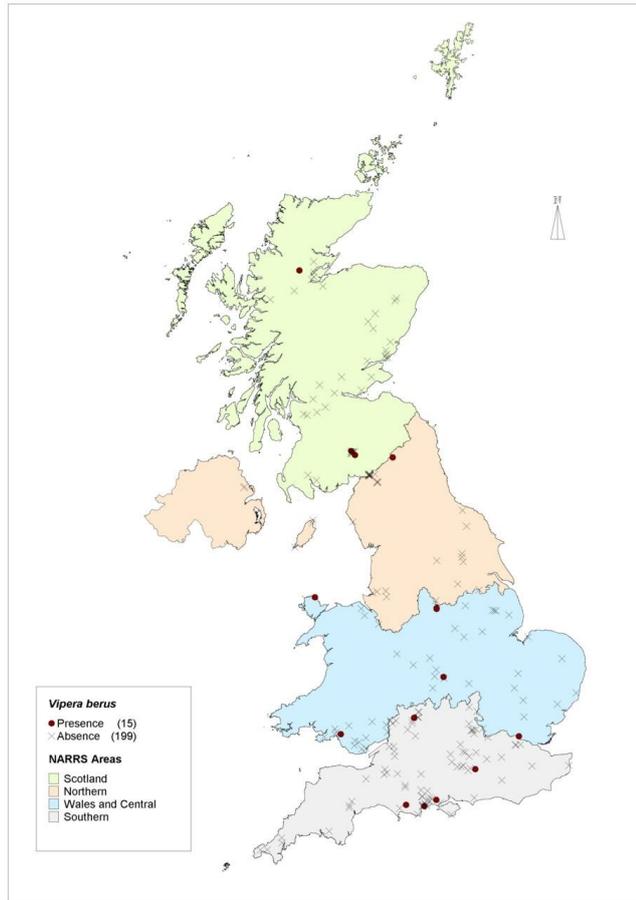
Smooth snake (*Coronella austriaca*) Habitat is limited to heathland in Dorset, Hampshire & Surrey with a reintroduction project in Devon. Photo: Chris Gleed-Owen



Locations of NARRS reptile survey squares 2007 – 2009.



NARRS squares 2007 – 2009 with grass snakes present.



NARRS squares 2007 – 2009 with adders present.

The common lizard (*Zootoca vivipara*) is the most common reptile but still only present in a third of survey squares. Photo: Howard Inns.



The slow-worm (*Anguis fragilis*) is widely distributed and came out in second place. Allotments and gardens are important habitats. Photo: Chris Dresh (ARC)



The common toad (*Bufo bufo*) is in decline particularly in south and central England. Photo: Howard Inns.

The common frog (*Rana temporaria*) is becoming less common in the south but still twice as common as toads. Photo: Neal Armour-Chelu



NARRS will ultimately build into a series of snapshots of status for all our threatened herpetofauna, enabling us to investigate causes of decline and ensure species' survival into the future.

Volunteers

ARC's Admin Angels!

Here at ARC we don't just accommodate habitat management volunteers, we also have two volunteers that help out in the Bournemouth Office. I'd like to introduce you to Tony Sach - ARC Volunteer Membership Officer and Kim Newman - Admin & PR Assistant. Tony has taken on the responsibility of maintaining the ARC Friends database and Friends correspondence. Kim is a dab hand on the computer, has been doing lots of work on the ARC website and also recently set us up on Facebook and Twitter.



Kim Newman - Admin & PR Assistant

I grew up in Worcestershire, but moved down to Bournemouth for university in 2003. I studied BSc (Hons) Environment and Conservation Biology at Bournemouth University and then later MRes. Ecological and Environmental Science at The University of Southampton.

I co-organise Bournemouth and Poole Green Drinks, a free monthly networking event for anyone interested in all things 'green' and I am an active member of the Transition Town Bournemouth group.

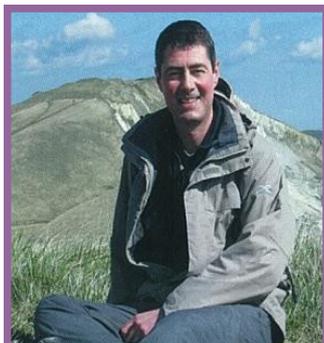
I'm a bit of a foodie and enjoy eating local and home grown food. I grow some of my own vegetables at home and regularly go along to workdays at a community garden/allotment in Poole.

Tony Sach - ARC Volunteer Membership Officer

My first encounter with reptiles was as a toddler, with lizards that lived in crevices under some large oak logs in our garden. I was fascinated that some of them had bright orange or yellow bellies. For some reason, snakes became my favourite – generally the larger the better – and I had no qualms about putting a python around my neck when I first got the opportunity. Perhaps my greatest moments, however, were in Sri Lanka, where I handled several young turtles at a sanctuary and got close to some crocodiles in the wild.

My wife, Anna, our border collie, Blake, and myself moved last year from the beautiful Lake District to Bournemouth and I was surprised to see a picture of our local beach in Cumbria on the wall in the office at ARC. That particular beach was a great place for natterjack toads and it was great to discover that ARC's work extends across the whole country.

My career has been mostly in admin and finance and, although I've done some outdoor volunteering for Dorset Wildlife Trust, I'm hoping that I can use my experience to support ARC's work and to, hopefully, bring in more funding. I've been given the lofty title of Volunteer Membership Officer and, if you are a Friend of ARC, I may recognise your name from the work I've been doing on our database.



And on the Dorset Reserves...

In January of this year Stuart Handyside replaced Dorset Reserves Community Officer Rowland Griffin for the remainder of the project which finishes in July. Stuart started volunteering with us in 2007 and in 2008 became one of our Volunteer Task Leaders.

The winter season was very productive for our army of volunteers. Efforts were focused on four main reserves (Town Common, Fern-down Common, Parley Common and Dunyeats). Large areas of pine and birch scrub have been cleared really improving the habitats.

Since the season ended Stuart has been focused on organising the majority of our events programme for this year and making sure that our volunteers are equipped to continue when his post ends. Being an absolute fanatic about herps and heathland it comes as no surprise that he will be back in the winter performing his duties as a Volunteer Task Leader! As always we want to thank everyone who volunteers their free time to do fantastic and important work on the heaths. Your work is invaluable.

Natterjacks in Scotland - A joint project

By John Buckley - Amphibian Conservation Officer
and Bill Shaw - Cumbria Natterjack Officer



Scotland's Solway Coast, from Southernness to Annan, has been well known for its natterjacks since at least the 19th century. Well-grazed merse, with numerous upper salt marsh pools and the adjacent low lying pastures with shallow floodings, used to provide ideal breeding and feeding habitat for large populations of these toads. Until recently it was easy to find natterjacks at all the likely places in Scotland. Sadly this is no longer the case.



New pool formed by erosion at Priestsides.
Photo: John Buckley (ARC)

Thanks to the excellent monitoring by the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (WWT) at Caerlaverock reserve, we have exact figures. There was a huge decline in breeding numbers there between 2005 and 2006; at least 187 spawn strings were laid in the pools monitored by WWT in 2005, but the next year only six were found. Then just eight spawn strings were recorded in 2007 and since then the population has remained very small.

All along the nearby Priestsides Merse it was once easy to find scores of natterjacks simply by looking under refugia, but now this reveals just one or two. The natterjack populations have declined along a stretch of coast 10km long.

It's hard to be certain what has caused this massive decline. Certainly at Caerlaverock, amphibians have tested positive for the chytrid fungus and it could be the main factor behind the decline there, but at other sites habitat deterioration could be involved. Nowadays the merse is less well grazed than before and known breeding sites have definitely been lost to drainage or infilling. It might be that the declines have been driven by more than one factor in Scotland and at some places the lack of good quality habitat may have reached a critical point.



Natterjack scrapes at Mersehead.
Photo: John Buckley (ARC)



Nethertown - Flooded area containing natterjack spawn.
Photo: Bill Shaw (ARC)

This year, ARC started a joint project with Scottish Natural Heritage to get a better understanding of the status of the natterjacks in Scotland. Through the recruitment of new volunteers and the encouragement of old hands, more records will be made by a strengthened network of monitorers. ARC staff will also be undertaking monitoring themselves and investigating reports of calling adults from farmers and others living within earshot of natterjack sites. In the process of visiting all the sites, the project will identify key conservation work needed.

Thankfully the picture is not all doom and gloom. Natterjack numbers west of the River Nith have not declined, and at the RSPB's Mersehead reserve, where management work for waders also benefits natterjacks, the population is growing. Also this year, small choruses of male natterjacks have been heard at Caerlaverock, and at places along the Priestsides Merse adults have been seen and spawn and tadpoles located. In the next few months further effort will be devoted to finding where natterjacks remain and to monitoring their breeding. ARC will then propose plans to aid natterjack population recovery, but only time will tell whether populations can regain their former size.

2011 Herpetofauna Workers Meeting

By Colin Williams - Gwent ARG

As published in 'ARG Today.'

Having only recently joined my local ARG at the insistence of my reptile-obsessed daughter Rhiannon, I approached the 2011 Herpetofauna Workers Meeting (HWM) with some uncertainty. Not knowing what to expect, I was concerned that the science might be too advanced for my limited understanding. In Cardiff, however, it was on our doorstep and there was no chance that Rhiannon would let me get away with not going, so along we went.



The first day - Presentations

Photo: Angela Reynolds (ARC)

The first day started with an opportunity to mingle and view the wares on the various stalls. It was not long before I was laden down with all sorts of interesting, and mostly free, literature. My wallet didn't escape for long, however, and Rhiannon soon persuaded me to buy an admittedly stunning print by Tell Hicks. (www.reptileshirts.com) The artist himself was there to explain that the Perentie it depicted had been introduced to him by the late Steve Irwin.

The first talk given by Tobias Uller (Oxford University), was a fascinating account of the increasing role played by genetics in herpetofauna conservation. This set the tone for what was a tremendously interesting series of talks that spanned the broad range of herpetological subjects. I was gripped particularly by Mike Toms' account of the herpetofauna reported from British gardens as part of the BTO's survey. Though familiar with the role of the garden pond, I had not fully realised the importance of gardens as a habitat for reptiles and amphibians and must confess great envy for the householders in Dorset who have all six native reptiles in their garden. Broken only by a very pleasant lunch, the talks came thick and fast but were always informative and engrossing, and before we knew it the main part of the day was over and it was time for the ARG UK AGM.

The pleasures of the day were not over, however, and we soon headed off to a superb dinner. As well as an excellent meal, this was a great opportunity to meet and chat to fellow delegates. On our table alone we had people from all over the country and from extremely different backgrounds, from school child to biochemist. This diversity was remarked upon by the final speaker of the day, Trent Garner (IOZ), who said that in his experience gatherings of people from such different backgrounds did not happen in other countries, and that we should not underestimate the power of such co-operation. Trent, together with Freya Smith (IOZ), went on to provide a fitting ending to a terrific day. Their presentation on a very serious subject, amphibian disease, was both technically detailed and hugely entertaining.

The second day was very different but just as interesting. This was workshop day, where delegates chose three from a menu of workshops on offer. Unfortunately, it was not possible to participate in all of the workshops, and the greatest difficulty was in choosing which ones to miss out on. However, the organisers made every effort to meet the preferences of the delegates so that, having made the hard choice, we were able to attend the sessions that we wished. Apart from the quality of the workshops themselves, this was a fantastic opportunity to meet still more people and have some lively group discussions. Again, the topics under discussion covered the full spectrum of herpetology.

Although I began these two days with some uncertainty, I came away from them having been educated, entertained and encouraged to get out in the field and do some practical work. Rhiannon, too, although she was by far the youngest delegate, thoroughly enjoyed the whole experience. With her prior interest in snakes in particular, she was predictably fascinated by Nigel Hand's (Herefordshire Amphibian & Reptile Team) account of adder ecology in the Wyre Forest but was also enthused by the various talks about amphibians. She also greatly enjoyed her discussions with the many people who came to speak to her throughout the two days. I would encourage anyone out there, young or old, with an interest in herpetology to come along to future events, as I'm sure they would enjoy them as much as Rhiannon and I did. As for us I think we have a new annual event in our calendar!

There are many local ARG's all over the country. Please visit the ARG UK website www.arguk.org to see what's going on in your area.

The Great Easter Newt Hunt

The Great Easter Newt Hunt Results

Amphibian and Reptile Conservation in partnership with ARG UK launched 'The Great Easter Newt Hunt' earlier this year. We appealed for people to spend 20 minutes of their time (10 minutes during the day and 10 at night with a torch) looking in their garden ponds to see if they could spot newts and then report their findings to us using a specially created website. The website had a page on identifying the different species and survey techniques. www.newthunt.org



Our widespread newts species are the least protected of our amphibians. The information acquired from the survey will help us find out more about our widespread newts and plan their conservation along with evaluating the real importance of garden ponds. We had a total of 237 returns and you can see the results below. Female newts are difficult to identify and so were recorded separately.

Records received

498 male smooth newts during the day and 447 during the night.
582 male palmate newts during the day and 632 during the night.
and 765 female newts during the day and 748 during the night.

Other species

32 ponds contained great crested newts.
138 ponds contained frogs.
49 ponds contained toads.



Smooth newt.
Photo: Fred Holmes

So where were the newts seen?

Almost 90% saw newts in small or medium sized ponds (under 5 metres), and most of these were un-shaded or only part shaded. Half the ponds in the Newt Hunt were over five years old.

90% of people reporting newts did NOT use chemicals in their gardens (good!) and about the same number had plants growing in their ponds. Only about 20% of newt ponds in this study had any fish in them.

Interestingly, 37% of ponds where newts were spotted weren't specifically wildlife ponds and 60% said cats used the gardens where the surveys took place. This shows us that such ponds are a good home for newts even if they aren't necessarily designed for wildlife and even if there's a danger from predation by cats! Perhaps, though, the sort of person who likes cats is also more likely to like wildlife and therefore have a pond!?

What ponds do newts like best?

The combined results of the 2011 Easter Newt Hunt, show that the typical ponds that contained smooth and/or palmate newts were under 5m in size, up to half shaded and contained aquatic plants but not fish. Most newt ponds were in places where no chemicals were used.

All in all, the results are great news because it demonstrates just how valuable our garden ponds can be for wildlife, including newts! Even small ponds can be great habitat for smooth and palmate newts and some even provide a home for the protected great crested newt. The best ponds for newts (and other wildlife) seem to be those in chemical and fish-free gardens.

You can find the distribution maps on the newt hunt website
<http://www.newthunt.org/results.php#MAPS>

More advice on wildlife ponds and creating places for amphibians and reptiles in your gardens can be found at <http://www.pondconservation.org.uk/advice/makeapond/> and <http://www.arc-trust.org/dragons/>

So, keep looking after your ponds! Plant native aquatic plants and leave out the fish – then wait to see what turns up!

Species Profile

Palmate newt (*Lissotriton helveticus*)



Male (above) and female (below) palmate newts.
Photo: Fred Holmes.

Adult: 50-90mm
larva: 30mm
Egg: 3mm diameter
(including jelly capsule)



Male foot (left), and
males tail (below).
Photos: Fred Holmes.

Behaviour

- Wake from hibernation in February and make way to breeding ponds.
- Some palmate newts move to the ponds in the autumn and stay there over the winter.
- Feed on small invertebrates on land and in water sometimes frog tadpoles.
- Larvae are secretive and tend to stay in weed or at the bottom of the pond.
- Hibernate November to February.

Habitat

- Favour ponds that have neutral to slightly acid pH.
- Found in upland and lowland areas favouring small ponds or ditches on heathland and moorland in open woodland and grassland.
- Get on better in relatively weed and fish free ponds.
- Tolerant of quite dry conditions.



Female. Photo: Fred Holmes.

Appearance/ colour

- Breeding male is dark olive to brown with dark eye-stripe and two lines of dark spots along the tail.
- Male has dark webs between its toes on back feet and a filament at end of its tail.
- Female is plain brown to olive sometimes with lines of spots on flanks and tail.
- Both sexes have a dull yellow underside with a few pale spots.
- Unspotted pink throat.
- Larva is brown in colour with feathery gills and rounded tail tip. Indistinguishable from smooth newt larva.
- Palmate newts in their terrestrial phase are brown or ginger in colour with almost a suede like appearance

Status

In Great Britain the palmate newt is protected only from sale and trade in any form.



Male from
above. (Right)
Photo: Mark
Gardener.



The belly and pink
throat.
Photo: Fred Holmes.



Male. Photo: Fred Holmes

Breeding

- Breeding and egg laying take place from March to June.
- Courtship and breeding take place at night.
- Females lay 200 - 300 eggs.
- Long egg laying season creates a wide age range of larvae. Some larvae will 'overwinter' (cease development until the following season).

Fundraising and Appeals

Ways you can support us financially



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.

Three easy steps

1 Fill in GiveACars online donation form

<http://www.giveacar.co.uk/donate-a-car-to-charity/amphibian-and-reptile-conservation> or call them on 020 0011 1664.

2. A collection agent will arrange a convenient time for vehicle collection within 7 days of your initial enquiry.

3. Depending on a vehicle's state of repair, it will either be sold at auction or disposed of at an Authorised Treatment Facility. Giveacar receives payment after the sale or disposal. They then make a donation to your chosen charity and you will be sent a receipt from both Giveacar and the charity.

Raise money for ARC at no extra cost!

Buying online? Why not make a donation towards conservation at the same time at no cost to you? With every purchase you make via our web shop the retailer will make a donation towards our important conservation work.

The buy.at shop gives you the best offers from major High Street names, whilst providing ARC with an income towards our fundraising targets.

Have a look next time you need to make a purchase www.buy.at/ARC

Where there's a Will there's hope for the future! Please remember ARC in your Will to ensure that our wildlife heritage is conserved for us and future generations.

Great crested newt project gets DEFRA go-ahead

ARC in partnership with Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology (DICE) at the University of Kent, has just secured funding for a 3-year project to investigate the effectiveness of mitigation measures designed to conserve great crested newt populations.



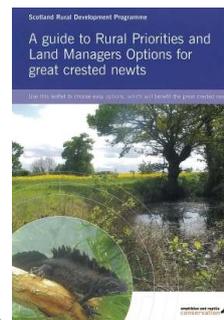
Developers and great crested newts frequently come into conflict and current guidance suggests how to compensate for the negative effects on newt populations caused by development. The project will identify a set of sites where mitigation has taken place since 2004 and investigate the effects of mitigation on the great crested newt populations. Comparisons will be made with nearby sites that have not been affected by the development.

The project will inform decision-makers of the effectiveness of current mitigation measures and thus help improve future guidance delivering tangible conservation benefits for this vulnerable species. (GCN photo: Howard Inns)

New Projects with Scottish Natural Heritage

We have also received funding from Scottish Natural Heritage for two great crested newt projects. The first extends the ground truthing element of ARC's 2010 project, which assessed the distribution and status of great crested newt in Scotland by the development of a predictive model based on current knowledge and field survey. The funding acquired this year will enable further field survey to be undertaken which will feed into, and strengthen, this model.

The second project, entitled 'Delivering the Species Action Framework for great crested newt in East Lothian,' has been developed with *The Farmed Environment* to determine the best way to help contribute to the Species Action Framework in Scotland (through targeting key landowners to develop management plans to deliver suitable measures for use as 'specialist plans' to support agri-environment applications). We have also developed a new leaflet 'A guide To Rural Priorities and Land Managers Options for great crested newts' alongside this project to facilitate the uptake of key options of benefit to great crested newts under the Scottish agri-environment scheme.



Events

Over the course of the summer Amphibian and Reptile Conservation will be attending a large number of events locally and nationally. Our aim is to raise awareness of what we as an organisation do and also the plight of our native reptiles and amphibians. Staff members and volunteers will be on hand manning our brightly coloured stand to talk to members of the public and introduce them to our native herpetofauna.

Events are really important as they give us an opportunity to reach a variety of people and answer a variety of questions. We hand out literature and advice and it provides a rare opportunity for people to see our native herps 'in the flesh.' This enables us to demonstrate identification techniques and helps to quash the myth that snakes are slimy and scary creatures! Come and see us at one of the events listed below.



Our brightly coloured stand.
Photo: Dr John Baker.

18th June - Holton Lee Summer Fair, Dorset - 11am - 5pm www.holtonlee.co.uk

**22nd - 24th July - CLA Game fair - Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire
Friday 9:30pm - 7:30pm, Saturday & Sunday 9:30am - 4pm (tickets required)
www.gamefair.co.uk**

31st July - Rustic Sunday - Rural Life Centre, Farnham, Surrey - 10am - 5pm

24th August - Reptile Safari - Iping Common, Grid ref SU853220 - 2pm - 4:30pm

27th August - Stock Gaylard Oak Fair - Stock Gaylard Estate, Sturminster Newton, Dorset - 10am (tickets required)

29th August - Peaslake Village Fair - Guildford, Surrey - 1pm - 5pm

**3rd - 4th September - Dorset County Show, Dorchester - (tickets required)
www.dorsetcountyshow.co.uk**

10th - 11th September - Thames Festival (Blue Ribbon Village), London - 12pm - 10pm www.thamesfestival.org

17th September (TBC) - Fete - Lindford Village Hall, Hampshire.

9th October - Apple Day - Blackmoor Estate, Liss, Hampshire - 10am - 4:30pm



Education is very important to us.
Photo: ARC



Staff are on hand to answer any questions you might have.
Photo: Angela Reynolds (ARC)



Quick but Cunning Crossword #1 Compiled by Mystic Toad

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Across

- The generic name of the adder (6)
- Produced by *Lacerta*, but not *Zootoca* (3)
- They go around with their eyes in them! (5)
- We have one of these of native snakes... (4)
- Seeing frogs often follows this (4)
- The Order to which tail-less amphibians belong (5)
- Name of a continental viper (3)
- Latin name of place where Keanu Reeves might live if he had a very bad cold! (6)

Down

- Adders and slow-worms, and some lizards, are this... (10)
- Toads and salamanders have these glands behind their eyes (8)
- New generic name for pool frogs (10)
- Metamorphic newts are called these, especially in the USA (4)
- So far as lizards are concerned, the smooth snake is one (8)
- Grass snakes complain they have to eat these! (4)

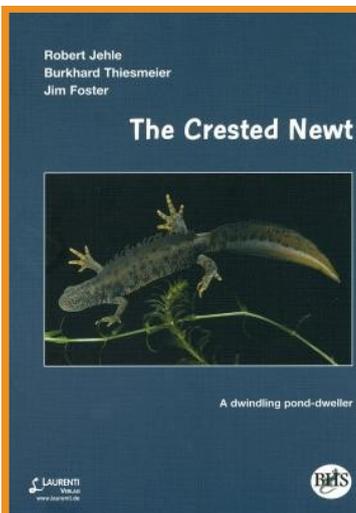
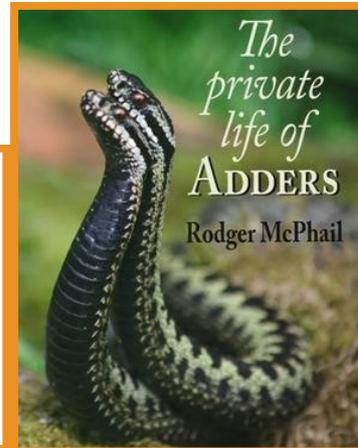
And Finally ...

New Publications

By Merlin Books. RRP £14.99.
Author - Rodger McPhail.

No other book offers such a comprehensive collection of photos of adders: hunting, striking, eating, courting, giving birth and swimming.

You can obtain this book from Amazon. If you buy it though the buy.at/ARC web shop you can donate at the same time at no extra cost.



By The British Herpetological Society.
£20.

Authors - Jehle, Thiesmeier & Foster

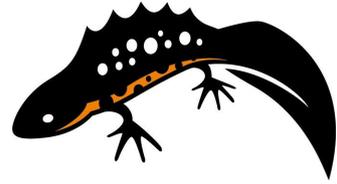
A must read for all those interested in the evolution, ecology, behaviour, conservation and management of crested newts.

You can obtain one using this link.

www.thebhs.org/Documents/Newt%20book%20flyer.pdf

Crossword answers
Across: 1. Viper, 4. egg, 6. orbit, 7. trio, 9. rain, 10. anura, 11. asp, 12. Natrix
Down: 1. viviparous, 2. parotid, 3. Pelophylax, 4. efts, 5. predator, 8. carp

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 20 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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www.arc-trust.org

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

Or call **01202 391319**

(9:00am - 5:00pm, Monday - Friday)