

HopGossip!

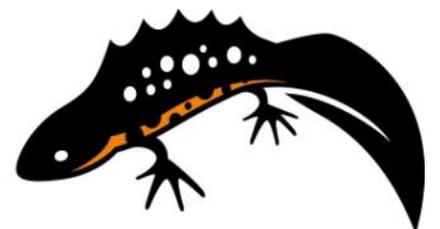
Winter/Spring 2011/12



In this issue ...

CLARE Project Update June - November 2011,
Herpetofauna Workers Meeting 2012,
Million Ponds Project in the North West,
Sand lizard captive breeding and re-introduction
programme
& much more!

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.

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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: Sand lizard hatchlings
Photo: Chris Dresh (ARC)
Hop Gossip is edited and designed by Angela Reynolds

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Welcome to the latest edition of Hop Gossip!

With Christmas only a few weeks away we are well in to the winter season and our native Herpetofauna are (almost!) all in hibernation.

We had one of our busiest seasons yet this year with many events. I hope you got the chance to come and say hello to us.

I would also like to congratulate Dorothy and Ben Driver and Rob Free and Maggie Cullen on their marriages earlier on this year. Well done! Bill Shaw has also got his hands full with two new editions to the family!

There's lots to read about in this issue including ARG UK and Pond Conservation's efforts to create a World Record on page 14, a feature on the sand lizard reintroductions ARC has been involved in and an update from Sophie Hinton from the half way stage of the CLARE Project on page 15.

If you are looking for a herp themed Christmas gift for yourself or a loved one this year why not consider attending The Herpetofauna Workers Meeting 2012. You can find details on page 14.

All that remains for me to say is thank you so much for your support, it really is greatly appreciated. Everyone here at ARC would like to wish you a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

With best wishes,

Angela



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

Dr. Tony Gent



As the nights draw in amphibians and reptiles respond to the changing day length and cooling temperatures by going in to hibernation. Some of our reptiles will have started to become inactive as early as late August, and our amphibians become trickier to see even early in the summer as their spawning seasons finish - but despite this we still hear reports of unusual sightings such as toads in amplexus (paired up ready to mate) in October, the possibility of snakes mating late in the year and carrying young until the spring and we all expect to hear of the occasional amphibian or reptile drawn out on a warm sunny day throughout the winter months.

But was 2011 a good year for our herps? As in most years we hear of mixed fortunes. The early drying out of some ponds will have had a negative local effect on some amphibian populations, while the population of reintroduced pool frogs showed signs of good survival amongst adults and despite initially good results from spawning, it seems that there was poor survival amongst the tadpoles this year. We are keeping an eye on the impact of disease and especially the 'chytrid' fungus, known to be present in UK populations of natterjack toads as it has caused massive mortalities elsewhere in the world. At present, this fungal disease doesn't appear to have caused too much of an impact on our natterjack colonies. For our heathland reptiles the cooler early summer meant that there were fewer heath fires overall, although there was at least one large fire that definitely had a significant adverse effect on the animals present on site. But ultimately it is not the year-on-year variations that matter - we need to ensure that we look after populations by protecting and managing large areas of habitat so that the populations are strong enough to survive in to the future.

The winter months will see much of the habitat conservation work needed to help herps, whether taken forward by ARCs field team, volunteers or any other organisation or individuals. Often this involves managing trees and scrub to provide a more open 'mosaic' of habitats that give good ground cover and let light and warmth touch the ground where reptiles may be active. Letting light in to ponds enable amphibians to breed and allowing warmth for the eggs and tadpoles to develop. This work benefits many plant, invertebrate, bird and mammal species with the variety of vegetation heights created as well as our herpetofauna. We at ARC are very conscious of our role in managing land to benefit a whole range of biodiversity.

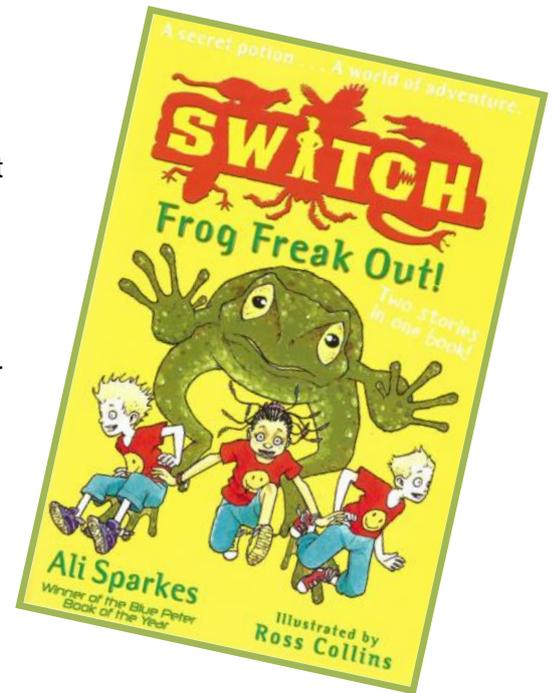
We are also pushing to see stronger measures taken forward for biodiversity conservation through Government policy and funding mechanisms. The EU has signed up to a new Biodiversity Strategy, with defined targets to help see an improvement in the status of biodiversity across Europe by 2020. In the UK new strategies are being developed in each of the separate countries and ARC is working with the Governmental Agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations to see how best these can be implemented. In England we have joined many other environmental groups in offering comments on the proposed National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), both individually and collectively through the Wildlife & Countryside Link coalition. The NPPF rightly drew criticism from a wide range of sources largely because it fell far short of the good intentions stated in the Ministerial covering letter. Far from an agenda for Sustainable Development the document seemed to encourage 'sustained development' with a disproportional emphasis on encouraging economic growth. We hope that our comments will help achieve a more useful outcome for wildlife conservation.

I'd like to finish with a thank you for your continued support - for the volunteers who have helped with survey work or with managing sites, helped at our events, donated time or money or simply passed on your best wishes to us. All of this makes a huge difference to us and for the animals we are all seeking to conserve. Thank you.

SWITCH books

ARC experts have been helping Ali Sparkes with her SWITCH books being published by OUP (www.switch-books.co.uk). It's a great little series for youngsters. The heroes Josh and Danny, two 8 year old boys, live next door to the crazy scientist Petty Potts who's developed an extraordinary serum called S.W.I.T.C.H. This leads to all manner of adventures for them and their new found friend Charlie.

Six books in the series featuring invertebrates are already published and six more starring amphibians and reptiles are in production. Frog Freak Out!, a two story book, is just out and this will be followed by one featuring our legged lizards and then leatherback turtles. ARC's role has been to proof read, and hopefully spot nasty herpetological errors before the books go to press. Similarly we've been able to look at Ross Collins rough illustrations and suggest how they might be tweaked to make the amphibians and reptiles even more realistic.



Congratulations Bill & Hilary!

ARC congratulates Bill Shaw and his girlfriend Hilary on the arrival of their adorable twins Orla Imogen and Seth Felix. Orla and Seth were born on Sunday 30th October at Whitehaven Hospital.

"Everybody is doing fine and I can't stop smiling! I couldn't imagine what it felt like to be a Dad, and now I know – it's just fantastic!!" said Bill.

Could Orla and Seth join the next generation of Cumbrian natterjack toad surveyors? Only time will tell!!



Orla & Seth with their very proud father!

Cumbrian natterjacks get more funding!



A new natterjack project has just started in Cumbria, thanks to a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Entitled 'Promoting Cumbria's Natterjack Heritage' the one year project will focus on raising awareness of natterjacks and getting more people involved in helping to conserve this charismatic amphibian.

Exciting new elements to be developed are the design of a website, the development of an online recording system and carrying out a social heritage exercise amongst former workers at old industrial sites where natterjacks bred.

Habitat management work will continue, with targeted money from the Higher Level Stewardship agri-environment scheme, with the ultimate aim of linking up all Cumbrian breeding sites.

Bill Shaw has been appointed as the Officer to lead this project. Bill has a lot of experience of natterjack conservation in the county and is looking forward to the new challenges ahead.



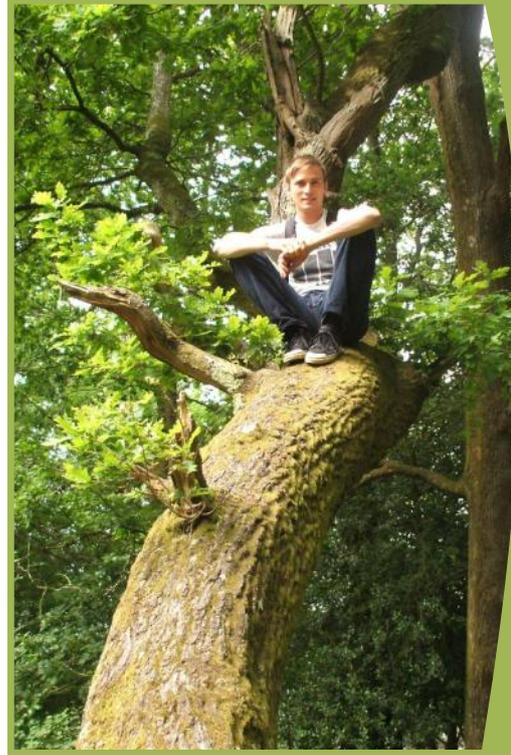
Cumbrian Natterjack. Photo: Angela Reynolds (ARC)

New Wealden Field Officer

In October of this year ARCs newest employee Matthew Dowse started his post as Wealden Field Officer. Matthew will be working alongside Rob Free and John Gaughan as part of our Wealden team.

Following an interest in wildlife and conservation I've had for as long as I can remember, in 2005 I attended the University of Southampton to study BSc (Honours) Environmental Science, focussing my degree specifically on biodiversity conservation and ecology. Since graduating in 2009, I have worked in several roles managing nature reserves and undertaking practical conservation work. Most recently I worked for the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust, wardening the largest area of lowland heathland left in Berkshire – Greenham and Crookham Commons SSSI – to protect ground-nesting birds during their breeding season.

In my new role as Weald Field Officer, I'll be sharing responsibility for managing the suite of heathland sites in Surrey, Hampshire and Sussex owned and managed by Amphibian and Reptile Conservation; ensuring they are maintained in excellent condition and continue to support nationally and internationally important herptile populations, as well as other heathland flora and fauna.



Golf club goes out on a Lymm for amphibians

By Becca Cleaver - Million Ponds Project Officer for Northern England

Ponds are a common feature of golf courses but whereas they are usually thought of as a hazard, the three new ponds at Lymm Golf Club, Cheshire, are cherished features that have earned the club an award.



The ponds were dug in November 2010 to help the local common toad, great crested newt and water vole populations with support and a grant from the Million Ponds Project and Biffaward. To qualify for the funding, the ponds needed to have a clean water source, free from fertilisers and pesticides, but this is hard to achieve on golf courses, where the land is heavily managed. Lymm Golf Club were able to overcome this by giving careful thought to where to dig, avoiding drains and ditches, switching to grass species that require less watering and very little fertiliser use, and careful management of waste

water to avoid polluting the water ways. It is this holistic approach that earned them the 2011 Water Management Award, one of six categories in the Golf Environment Awards. Golf Course Manager Stuart Yarwood has led this movement together with club member and wildlife enthusiast Brian Ankers. Stuart will collect the award on behalf of the club next month and can't wait to see if any amphibians breed there next spring.

In an industry where wildlife can take a back seat over amenity, and land and water is managed intensively, it's good to see how receptive people can be to the message about the importance of clean water to wildlife ponds. Hopefully, the award will help to raise awareness of the issues and the many opportunities within golfing circles, and pave the way for more amphibian-friendly ponds on golf courses.

For more information on the Million Ponds Project and how to create clean-water ponds visit www.pondconservation.org.uk/millionponds.

Photo right. Golf Course Manager Stuart Yarwood, Master Greenkeeper. Above. One of the new ponds. Photos: Becca Cleaver (MPP)



In the field

New ponds on Purbeck heathlands

By Gary Powell - Senior Reserves Manager



In September, as part of the Million Ponds Project and with funding from Biffaward, we created a total of 21 ponds on 4 ARC reserves in Purbeck (Holme Mount, Woolbridge, Cranesmoor and Great Ovens – all SSSIs). The project involved an initial assessment of the sites to choose suitable locations, botanical surveys to ensure that no rare plants would be damaged during the process and liaison with Natural England and landowners. There is a lot more to pond creation than just the digging! Decisions on issues such as water retention, use of spoil to create banks and proximity to public access routes were all discussed before the work went ahead. One of our regular ARC contractors with prior knowledge of all these reserves excavated the ponds and an experienced freshwater biologist supervised the work. ARC's Field Team were on hand during the pond digging to give the added benefit of their site knowledge.

The ponds will enhance the wildlife value of these heathland sites by providing new and varied habitat for amphibians and reptiles as well as a range of aquatic invertebrates and plants. An essential aspect of this is to create ponds in areas where they will fill with clean, unpolluted water – now rare in the UK landscape.

The project doesn't end here however. As these ponds are created 'from scratch', there is an interesting opportunity to look at how wildlife uses them. ARC and Pond Conservation are keen to monitor these ponds over the coming years to assess colonisation by various freshwater plants and animals. Ponds colonise fast – at Woolbridge a *Hydroporus* water beetle was arriving in one of the new ponds as the digger was leaving! The intention is to look for the arrival of amphibians from early next year and also to look at invertebrates such as dragonflies and damselflies. These surveys will also be a collaborative effort between a number of organisations, using our different areas of expertise. Look out for further reports in future issues of Hop Gossip.



Above & below. Great Ovens. Photo: Chris Dresh (ARC)



Batty about bats!

By Richard Sharp - Dorset Field & Health & Safety Officer

Although ARC manages sites because they are crucial for their reptiles and amphibians we look after a wide range of wildlife that occur on them. Duneats is an ARC nature reserve on the northern outskirts of Poole with wet and dry heath grading into the woodland of Delph Woods connecting the site to the wider countryside.

I recently helped install, along with volunteer Jon Crewe, 10 bat boxes on Duneats as part of a joint project with Jan Freeborn of Dorset Bat Group who had obtained a small grant from Green Grants to purchase and install bat boxes on various sites around Poole.

Sheltered oak and sweet chestnut trees with good spreading canopies were chosen in preference to the pines that are most common on site as they were deemed less likely to be affected by future habitat management work. We also sited the boxes facing a range of different directions to try and create different environments within the boxes, hopefully meeting the varied needs of bats throughout the night and between seasons.



All bat species in Britain, excepting the two horseshoe species, will use bat boxes but they can be very fussy and usually take some time to find and colonise a box. Pipistrelle (left) and the brown long eared (below right) are perhaps the most frequent users of bat boxes with even the largest British bats, noctule and serotines occasionally taking up residence.

To find out more about bats and how you can help these amazing but vulnerable animals, visit the Bat Conservation Trust's website. You can become a member and discover the many ways to get involved and do your bit for bats! The website is www.bats.org.uk and the free National Bat Helpline can be reached on **0845 1300 228**.



Jon & Richard with bat boxes.
Photo: Jan Freeborn.
Pipistrelle: Janice Whittington
(Bat Conservation Trust)
Brown long eared: Hugh Clark
(Bat Conservation Trust)



Just a few of the summer duties the ARC field teams have undertaken this year



Pond/ scrape maintenance



Bracken spraying



Site maintenance

Million ponds project - In the North West

By David Orchard - Ponds Project Officer

The Forestry Commission has recently created twelve ponds at Upper Moss Side (near Warrington, Cheshire) and a further seventeen at Windybank (near Glazebury, Greater Manchester). All the ponds were created this autumn using funding from the Million Ponds Project and assisted by me.

All of the new ponds will benefit amphibians but some are shallow (up to 30cm deep) and have been created with invertebrates and wading birds in mind. These will dry out over the summer and provide a valuable habitat for species that rely on temporary ponds.

Preparations for this work started in May 2010 when existing ponds at both sites were surveyed for amphibians. These surveys confirmed the presence of common toad, common frog and smooth newt.

Duncan MacNaughton is the Forestry Commission ranger for both sites. "The new ponds will be excellent for amphibians and they will also improve the habitat for many other species. Upper Moss Side lies alongside the River Mersey and since water voles are present in the area it is hoped that they will benefit from the new ponds." said Duncan. "Ponds at Windybank will benefit dragonflies and other invertebrates, as well as waders such as snipe." Within a few weeks the new ponds were already attracting birds such as wagtails to feed on insects at their muddy edges.



One of the aims of the Million Ponds Project has been to create diverse networks of ponds. Well designed ponds benefit a wide range of species, so they provide excellent value for money. The Forestry Commission has done a great job of creating new ponds with funding from the Million Ponds Project and we hope that they'll continue this work in the years to come.

All the new ponds have filled with water and are starting to blend into the landscape. Local Amphibian and Reptile Group volunteers will survey the new ponds in 2012 and future years to monitor the rate at which they are colonised by amphibians.



Above. Windybank. Above right. Upper Moss Side. Photos: David Orchard (ARC)

Conservation help for Wales' real dragons!

By Mark Barber - Welsh Volunteer Contact?

Between March and June of this year I worked for ARC as their first species officer for Wales. The three month post was partially funded by the Vodafone World of Difference UK programme, which provides the opportunity for applicants to work for a UK charity for two months. I applied to work for ARC and from over 11,000 applicants I was one of the lucky 500 to receive sponsorship!

The post continued for an extra month through monies secured from running training events, which was an important focus of the position. I ran two training events for Neath - Port Talbot Biodiversity Unit volunteers in identification skills, ecology and survey techniques for the council's grass snake project. Further to this volunteers were taken on numerous surveys to improve their field techniques so they could then survey by themselves with confidence. Predictive modelling of grass snake distribution was undertaken in the county and volunteers were then sent to the predicted locations.

I assisted Dr John Baker with reptile habitat management training at Wyre Forest and Dr John Wilkinson and Dorothy Driver with NARRS training in Borth, Mid Wales. I ran identification, ecology, survey techniques and habitat management training event for staff/volunteers of Wildlife Trust of South & West Wales and assisted Dorothy Driver with great crested newt training for the Ministry of Defence.

Another focus of the post was to raise awareness of ARC and herpetofauna conservation in Wales, I was interviewed on 'Swansea Sound' promoting in particular the 'Great Easter Newt Hunt' campaign. I also started work on a strategy for the conservation of amphibians and reptiles in Wales", and it is hoped that this report will push herpetofauna conservation in Wales in the right direction!



Above. Grass snake. Above right. Training. Photos: Mark Barber.



Sand lizard captive breeding and re-introduction programme

By Nick Moulton - Reptile Conservation Officer

This year has been exceptional for both the sand lizard captive breeding and re-introduction programme with upwards of an unprecedented 600 animals released on seven sites in England and Wales. The committed work by ARC, Natural England, Countryside Council for Wales, independent breeders, Chester Zoo, Marwell Preservation Trust, New Forest Reptile Centre and Avon Heath Country Park is continuing to ensure that large numbers of animals are available for release in this hugely successful joint partnership programme.

Priority re-introduction sites are selected based on a number of factors including known or presumed historic presence, sympathetic habitat management, size of site and connectivity to other site habitats.



Many sites require habitat management to make them suitable before releasing lizards including features such as bare sand for egg-incubation, the removal of shading trees and scrub and controlling bracken on heathland. Most of the site management required is undertaken by managers of the sites although ARC actively assists on the majority of them.

Prior to any release it is essential to prove the species is not already on the proposed site and that the animals would not naturally re-colonise from any nearby populations, for example, following on from large-scale habitat restoration projects. Such monitoring can take anything up to 5 years in order to determine if the species is absent. After the release, monitoring is again crucial to assess if the species has survived, bred and expanded its range over time. This takes a lot of time and effort and we are indebted to the joint monitoring partnerships, site staff and volunteers to ensure that we have effective monitoring strategies in place.

Since the late 1960's ARC has worked with many organisations and individuals to improve the status of the sand lizard in England and Wales. A total of seventy four reintroductions has restored the species to seven vice counties where it was extinct, and the number of colonies has been increased in five more. This work involved the release of 9,000 animals, mostly produced by the captive breeding programme that's coordinated by ARC. Currently 65% have been very successful, 12% have had limited success mainly due to damage by heath fires, 15% are on-going and doing well, 4% are currently unclassified due to access restrictions for monitoring and only 4% failed. These re-introductions have been accomplished in 11 vice counties, 7 of these where the species was previously extinct. To date 9000 animals have been released, mainly from the captive breeding programme.



Above. The team who worked so hard at one of the release sites on the Dorset Coast. Above left. Releasing the hatchlings. Photos: Chris Dresh (ARC). Above right. A male from the Merseyside colony. Photo: Chris Davis (ARC)



Wealden sand lizard releases

By Rob Free - Weald Reserves Manager

The captive breeding and release into the wild of the Weald race of sand lizards has an extremely good track record of success. ARC's former Weald Reserves Manager, Mike Preston, is responsible for breeding this race and has around 20 breeding animals held in captivity in a specially constructed outdoor vivarium. These were taken under Natural England licence from several of the original wild native populations some years ago in order to maximise genetic variation in their descendants. Mike routinely gets around 200 young each year from these animals with double clutching now occurring every year. The young are carefully hand reared away from the main vivarium to reduce the risk of cannibalism from the adults. In Britain we separate three different 'races' of sand lizards namely Dorset, Merseyside and the Surrey and Sussex 'race' is known as the Weald race.

This year ARC released a further 50 juvenile Weald sand lizards on a National Trust's property in West Sussex, 100 on a southerly part of the MoD's Ash Ranges near Aldershot - the second year of a three year programme and 50 on Waverley Borough Council's Mare Hill site near Witley in Surrey.

The Waverley Borough Council is part of Thursley, Hankley and Frensham SSSI an extensive 1800 hectare area of lowland heathland south of Guildford. The heathland areas of the SSSI are now all separated from each other by secondary woodland that has grown up along roadsides and site margins largely since the Second World War. It is therefore extremely difficult for sand lizards to re-colonise sites without human intervention. This year's release of 50 young at this site was the first in a three year programme of releases, the aim being to release around 150 animals in order to generate a robust breeding population.



Sand lizard. Photo: Chris Dresh (ARC)



Release location at Mare Hill. Photo: Rob Free (ARC)



Releasing the lizards. Photo: Rob Free (ARC)

Waverley Borough's ranger, Ian Baldwin, has been working with ARC for several years to prepare a release site for the lizards. Initially joint tasks with ARC staff and volunteers focussed on removal of invasive birch and gorse scrub around south facing banks and good, mature heathland habitat.

This spring we helped Ian to install some rotovated bare sand traces which will eventually form egg laying sites at the release focus. The young captive-reared lizards were released on site on a warm morning in mid September. This will give them a few weeks to familiarise themselves with the area before hibernation.

Volunteers

For the last five years ARC has been running a Dorset community reserves project with the help of the Heritage Lottery Fund. The project focused on involving local communities and individuals on our sites has been a great success and is now officially completed. Perhaps the biggest achievement of the project was the creation of a large and varied volunteer work force which we intend to continue supporting. We now have volunteers trained up to lead tasks and undertake regular habitat management tasks over winter and survey work in the spring and summer. Volunteers are also helping in the office with the website, communications, fundraising, data analysis and admin support.



Richard Sharp.
Photo: Chris Dresh (ARC)

Our new volunteer contact is Richard Sharp one of the Dorset Field Team. Richard has experience in running volunteer groups and can be contacted on richard.sharp@arc-trust.org.

Information about volunteering in Dorset, the Weald (Hampshire, Surrey, Sussex) or nationally through NARRS (National Amphibian and Reptile Recording Scheme) can be found on our website at <http://www.arc-trust.org/volunteers>.

Dorset Reserves Community Officer By Gary Powell - Senior Reserves Manager

To mark the end of ARC's five year Heritage Lottery Funded project a number of staff and a group of our dedicated volunteers took a day trip to Marwell Zoo. The highlight of the day was a behind-the-scenes look at their sand lizard captive breeding facility. Most of us present on the day were used to carefully searching amongst the heather for elusive and shy sand lizards but here there was no need – the lizards, obviously used to being observed, were content to crawl around their environments in full view of all!



Sitting in a local pub afterwards with everyone tucking in to a meal really brought it home to me what a great team we have assembled over the last five years, and reinforced to me how we really must keep them together.

So I'd like to say a very big thank-you, on behalf of myself and all ARC staff to our four Community Officers: Graham Stanley, Debbie Clothier, Rowland Griffin and Stuart Handyside as well as all the volunteers who have given us their time, support and encouragement during the project. You have all made a difference and we hope to see you all back for more in the new winter season.

Volunteers



ARC Volunteers & Staff & sand lizard (above right) Photos: Angela Reynolds (ARC)

My first encounter with natterjacks in Cumbria

By Tim Bernhard - Natterjack toad surveyor

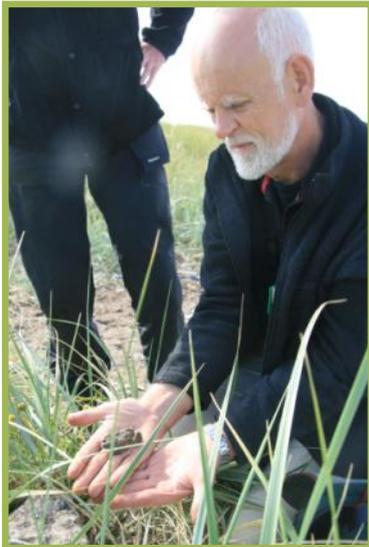
Towards the end of a rather wet and unimpressive August, I was given the chance to attend the special gathering of natterjack recorders at Silloth on Solway in the north of the county. The long journey from Hampshire with ARC's Amphibian Conservation Officer, John Buckley, ended at Mawbray Bank where we joined Bill Shaw who was busy supervising scrape management work. Having become familiar with our only native lowland heath colony over many years I was fascinated to see a completely different type of natterjack habitat, something entirely different from Woolmer Forest. The animals not only inhabit the sand dunes breeding in the shallow pools found amongst the dunes, but they even venture onto the beach itself to forage for food along upper shore. Having thought about this a little more, I realised that far from it being strange the drift line is actually a very productive habitat, by turning over a few pieces of drift wood you can very quickly find huge number of invertebrates. The beach also provides a vital link with nearby colonies so that natterjacks can freely disperse and also colonise new sites when possible.

It then wasn't very long before I found my first adult Cumbrian natterjack under a piece of wood, followed by a juvenile nearby.

The next day, 24th August, at 10.30, some 20 enthusiastic people gathered at the Solway Coast AONB Discovery Centre and soon departed for a fascinating tour of The Grune, beside the dramatic Solway Firth, to see its successful natterjack colony. We visited several of the breeding pools and were impressed by the low embankment, re-built this year, to prevent the pools from being inundated by salt water too frequently. We found numerous natterjacks under various pieces of debris and everyone



thoroughly enjoyed the fresh air, the spectacular coast and the occasional view of a porpoise leaping from the sea.



John Buckley - Amphibian Conservation Officer.
Photo: Bill Shaw (ARC)

Back at the Discovery Centre, we gathered for the formal meeting chaired by John and minuted by Bill who, as ARC's Cumbria's Natterjack Conservation Officer, has been working hard to maintain the existing network of Natterjack colonies along the Cumbrian coast and to improve habitats so that the species may re-establish itself on former sites. News of the forthcoming new edition of the Natterjack Toad Site Register was received with interest, Bill read out Peter Minting's fascinating report of his research into chytrid fungus and its effects of at sites in Cumbria, but the best part of the meeting was to hear the individual reports given by the different site recorders. Large numbers of spawn strings were recorded at the several important sites from Sandscale Haws in the south to Anthorn in the north of the county and on the whole 2011 seems to have been an excellent year for the county's natterjacks. All too soon the meeting ended. It had been a great experience to meet such a group of enthusiastic volunteers and professionals and to learn how well this enigmatic animal is faring in a different part of the country.



The Grune. Above right Natterjack. Photos: Tim Bernhard

The Herpetofauna Workers Meeting 28th - 29th January 2012

By Angela Reynolds - Herpetofauna Workers Meeting Team

I can't quite believe that it has come around again so quickly but here it is! I would like to introduce the annual Herpetofauna Workers Meeting 2012! This year The Telford International Centre (TIC) in Shropshire will be hosting the event in a purpose built state of the art conference centre. Everyone is welcome from beginners to experts and this year promises to be a corker!

Talks this year will include subjects such as Adder Genetics, updates from regional Amphibian & Reptile Groups and an update on the pool frog reintroduction project. There is a choice of four different workshops as well as a Gala Dinner and the return of the popular herpetological quiz "Have I got Newts for You!"

For further information including the programme, booking form and details on booking accommodation please take a look at our website <http://www.arc-trust.org/events/HWM> or email Angela on angela.reynolds@arc-trust.org. The closing date for registration is Monday 9th January.



50 pond challenge

In October this year a group of 30 volunteers embarked on a challenge to create 50 ponds in 24 hours in an attempt to set a world record.

The 50 Pond Challenge organised by ARG UK and Pond Conservation took place on a private nature reserve managed by Herpetologic Ltd on behalf of Zenolia Marine BVI Ltd in Nevendon, Essex.

All of the ponds were dug successfully by hand by the volunteers from Writtle College, Pond Conservation and members of Essex and London Amphibian and Reptile Groups.

The ponds will be left to fill and develop naturally. It is hoped that the common frog will benefit from the ponds which will in turn provide food in the way of tadpoles for invertebrates and the resident colony of newts.

The Guinness World Records didn't accept the record submission as it was "a little too specialised." The group are claiming the record for digging the most ponds in 8 hours but will have to wait for the ponds to form and fill naturally. You can keep up to date with progress on the project page www.arguk.org/50-pond-challenge-22nd-to-23rd-october.



Common frog. Photo: Angela Reynolds (ARC)

A weekend of fresh air by the sea



November saw volunteers descending on the sand dunes at Talacre (near Prestatyn in North Wales) for two days of intensive habitat management work removing scrub from sand dunes to benefit the sand lizard and natterjack toad. Ten of these weekends have been organised by the Amphibian and Reptile Group of South Lancashire (ARGSL) in partnership with BHP Billiton Petroleum (the land-owner) and Flintshire Countryside Service Coastal Rangers.

Each of the Talacre weekends has been well supported by members of Bolton Conservation Volunteers. "This is a great example of volunteer groups working together for the benefit of wildlife" says David Orchard, chair of ARGSL. "By joining forces with another group, we've been able to ensure that all our task weekends have been a great success."

In 2010, volunteers from ARGSL and the BCV were awarded BHP Billiton's Community Group of the Year award, in recognition of their work at Talacre.

The latest volunteer task, coordinated by Kim Norman and supported by funding from the Million Ponds Project is to create new natterjack pools. If you'd like to take part in Talacre weekends, please e-mail David Orchard, chair of ARGSL at argsl@btinternet.com. Photo: David Orchard (ARC)

The CLARE Project Update - June to November 2011

By Sophie Hinton - CLARE Project Officer



Since the start of the our London based project: CLARE (Connecting London's Amphibian & Reptile Habitats) we've been very busy raising awareness and generating interest in frogs, toads, newts, snakes and lizards in the Capital. The project is run in partnership with The London Wildlife Trust and recently formed London Amphibian and Reptile Group.

The project has taken shape around two of London Wildlife Trust's living landscape areas: 'From Thorn to Orchid' chalk grassland sites in Bromley and Croydon (south London) and 'Crane Valley' alongside river habitat in Hillingdon and Hounslow (west London) covering over 15 reserves. The first part of this project has revolved around promoting amphibians and reptiles to people in these areas, recording their sightings and setting up monitoring schemes for these areas.



Nick Baker (Naturalist and Broadcaster) visiting our stand at the wildlife Expo.
Photo: LWT.
Top right: Meeting the reptiles with ARC Trustee Bill Whitaker.
Photo: Sophie Hinton (ARC).

The upcoming winter will bring more workdays carrying out habitat management on known herp sites all around London. If you live in London or just happen to be passing through and want to get involved or if you have any suggestions for sites which currently need management or monitoring for herps then get in touch on sophie.hinton@arc-trust.org or 07810 184 501. We'd love to hear from you.

Spring 2012 will bring surveys, Bioblitz's and Great Easter Newt Hunts which will help us find out just where London's amphibians and reptiles are living (and how they're doing). Let us know what amphibians and reptiles you've seen in London – follow the CLARE record form link from our CLARE page www.arc-trust.org/CLARE (where you can also find out the latest updates). The records are held at GiGL, London's environmental record centre whom we also work in partnership with.

Other project successes include ...

- Trained 25 people in herpetofauna focussed habitat management.
- Featured in five online articles and two newspapers.
- Held six reptile rambles for volunteers and local residents in seven London boroughs.
- Attended two huge events with 1000's of people (The Thames Festival had over 825,000 visitors and the WildlifeXpo was a great success this being the first event of its kind in London).
- Recruited 30 enthusiastic herp volunteers, who've been an enormous help at events over the last few months and will be crucial to our surveying efforts next year (A BIG thank you to our volunteers!)
- Collected over 125 records (and counting) from members of the public.
- Held a habitat management workday on Saltbox Hill, London Wildlife Trust reserve with good slow-worm and common lizard populations.
- Been to two local events to promote the project and the need for public records including the project launch at Hutchinson's bank and the Crane River Festival on World Rivers day.

Species Profile

Slow-worm (*Anguis fragilis*)



Habitat

Wide ranging which includes

- Vegetated Sea cliffs.
- Heathlands.
- Open woodland.
- Rough grassland.
- Hedge banks.
- Gardens/ Allotments.
- Rail embankments/ beside railway lines.
- Urban wasteland.



Slow-worms are the reptile most likely to be encountered in a garden as Britain's most urban species. There are colonies in many major cities.



Status

Slow-worms are a UK BAP Priority species

Top. Male slow-worm.
Above centre. The tongue.
Above left: Blue speck pattern.
Above. Melanistic slow-worm.
Below right. Female with young.
All photos: Fred Holmes (ARC).

Breeding

- Mate in April & May.
- Rivalry between males results in combat.
- Up to 25 young are born live in one clutch during August and September.
- During summer gravid (pregnant) females are noticeably swollen.

Appearance/ colour

- Smooth, shiny appearance.
- Adult males are grey or grey/brown with a steel-grey underside with lighter markings.
- Female has a brown back which can be any shade from gold to deep copper with darker flanks and a black underside.
- Females often have a thin dark line running down the length of their backs.
- The males have broader heads than the females.
- The tail (if complete) is longer than the body.
- Slow-worms have eyelids.
- Some specimens (usually males) have tiny blue specks on their upper body.
- Entirely black (melanistic) specimens occur but are extremely rare.
- The tongue is broad and flat with a notched tip.



Behaviour

- Usually hibernate underground or in dense vegetation between October and March.
- Prefer to bask semi-concealed in deep vegetation rather than in the open.
- Find warmth by sheltering under flat rocks or debris exposed to the sun and compost heaps.
- May 'drop' their tail when handled or confronted by predators. The shed tail twitches as a distraction to give a better chance of escape.





Festive facts, tips and advice!

By Kim Newman - ARC Volunteer Admin & PR Assistant

Did you know?

Nearly 8 million Christmas trees are put up around the country each December. Around 6 million of these end up in landfill! Every Christmas ARC gives local residents in Dorset the opportunity to choose their Christmas tree from specially identified areas within certain sites. Why not find out if a similar scheme is running in your area? Don't forget to recycle your tree come January!



Town Common Nature Reserve. Photo: Chris Dresh (ARC)

Kim's Top tips for a greener Christmas

1. Buy a real tree with a root ball which can be planted outside each year and reused every Christmas. Alternatively you could see if there are sites undergoing winter management like ARC's or other schemes in your area where you can pick up a tree.
2. If you do throw away your tree make sure it is recycled.
3. Save electricity, keep light displays to a minimum and remember to switch off before you go to bed.
4. Send e-cards or cards made from recycled paper and don't forget to recycle yours in January.
5. Reduce gift wrapping and unnecessary packaging and recycle anything that can't be reused next year.
6. Take your unwanted Christmas gifts to the charity shops.
7. Try to be sensible about the quantity of food you buy and shop for local produce to reduce your carbon footprint. Recycle or reuse leftovers.

How can I protect the creatures in my pond if it freezes over?

Some frogs, particularly males, spend the winter in ponds, as do small numbers of newts. Occasionally, in particularly icy spells, amphibians can die of 'winterkill' due to low oxygen levels or possibly toxic gases (released in the pond through natural decomposition of dead leaves) which cannot escape due to the layer of ice. Though this can be upsetting to pond-owners this phenomenon is largely natural and will only affect a very small percentage of the local frog population.

Amphibians can 'breathe' through their skin. Providing that there is sufficient oxygen in the water, they can survive for long periods beneath the ice. A traditional solution has been to create a hole in the ice to allow gas exchange with the air. Recent research suggests that this may be ineffective, and growth of plants and green algae may be more helpful, as these oxygenate the water, even under ice. A hole in the ice probably won't make any difference to the oxygen level in the pond but it may help air breathing creatures which can swim to the surface for air (such as smooth newts). It'll also give the birds somewhere to drink. Clearing snow from the surface of a frozen pond may help, allowing more light to enter, hence increasing oxygen production from submerged plants and algae. Never pour hot water on to the ice or use chemicals or salt. Similarly, do not be tempted to smash the ice as this can damage pond liners and plants.



Common frog. Photo: Fred Holmes. (ARC)

Events

ARC would like to thank everyone who came to visit us at one of our stands this year. We had great fun talking to you, hearing your stories and answering your questions. We would also like to say a huge thank you to everyone who has made donations in 2011. Your contributions really do go a long way to helping us conserve our native species in their natural habitats.

The show season is now over but we are still out and about doing volunteer tasks. If you would like to find out more about volunteering with us please look on the website at www.arc-trust.org/volunteers.



Photos: Angela Reynolds (ARC)

Blackmoor Apple Day 2011

By John Buckley - Amphibian Conservation Officer



A highlight of early autumn in Hampshire is the Blackmoor Estate's Apple Tasting Day where volunteers finely slice apples or pears of some 20 varieties for visitors to taste, compare and contrast (a bit like a beer festival without the side effects). Nearby are demonstrations and displays by rural craft companies, local societies, conservation organisations and others, all with countryside interest.

This year the Wealden Team's well-oiled events machine came to life again when five of us met at our usual pitch to begin the tasks of erecting the marquee, transferring animals into their display tanks and arranging the models, handbooks, booklets, posters and leaflets. A cool start to the morning delayed the arrival of the usual crowds, but soon there was non-stop activity.

Apple Day, with its village fete atmosphere, is popular with those who visit in family groups, couples or as individuals. It provides the ideal opportunity for ARC staff and volunteers to chat with the many interested people and fulfil one of its important educative roles. The total number of visitors is never known, however judging from the number of parked cars, the number was well in excess of 5,000 in 2011.

For much of the day the front of ARC's stall was two or three deep, children slowly working their way along with their parents. Many were keen to hold the smooth snake, the common toad or even the smelly grass snake! Being late in the year, the animals were generally content to stay on warm hands and yes; proper hand washing facilities were close by.

In the course of the day we all had the chance to look around, meet some friends and purchase a good supply of apples! We hope to see you all at Apple day 2012!



The busy stand. Photo: Fred Holmes (ARC)

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)