

Leicestershire Amphibian and Reptile Network



*Newsletter No. 13
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NARRS

The National Amphibian and Reptile Recording Scheme got underway in 2007; it will be running again this year, and is still looking for volunteers to help with the survey work. For further information on NARRS, see www.narrs.org.uk

Kay Snowdon (Holly Hayes) has organised a reptile training day based at Rutland Water on 12th April. Unfortunately, it is already fully booked (though it may be possible to get on the reserve list).

Historic Herps

The Victoria County History of Leicestershire, published in 1907, has, in its natural history descriptions, a section on “Reptiles and Batrachians” (as amphibians were then known). It provides some interesting comparisons with the present situation.

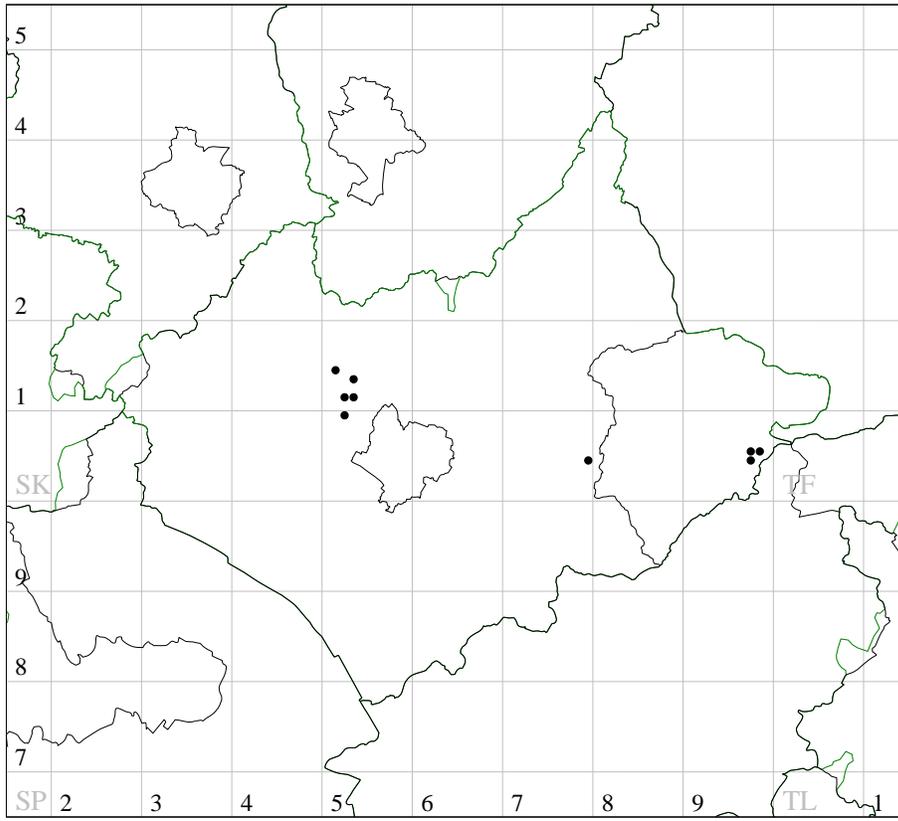
The common lizard was said to occur commonly in Charnwood Forest and other places. The slow-worm was “resident, commonly distributed and variable in colour”. Neither could now be said to be common.

The grass snake was “commonly distributed, especially throughout Charnwood Forest” – it is now more productive to look for them in the river valleys and along canals. Around 1905, an albino grass snake found at Eye Kettleby was thought to be the first recorded example of albinism in reptiles. The adder, “generally distributed, especially about Charnwood Forest”, is now much reduced in distribution.

Frogs, toads and smooth newt were evidently as common as they are now, and the great crested newt was also “resident and generally distributed”. There was no mention of the palmate newt, which has a precarious hold in the county.

Two other records are of note. One is the admission by the chapter author (Montague Brown) that he had introduced natterjacks into Leicester Museum grounds. Even more intriguingly, there is a reference back to an earlier writer (James Hurley, writing 1840-55) of sand lizards recorded in the county (though it is not stated where) – apparently, distinctly distinguished from common lizards. This is a species no longer found anywhere near Leicestershire, and it would be good to have more details.

Adder (*Vipera berus*)



ARG UK

Details of amphibian and reptile groups around the country are available on the ARG UK website www.arguk.org (note the new address). You will find information and regular newsletters there, as well as details of the annual Herpetofauna Workers Meeting.

Sawley Marina

The M1 widening study turned up a number of interesting new records which were submitted to the group, including what is probably Leicestershire's largest toad population (1000 were counted) at Sawley Marina beside the Trent.

Beware Adders

There was an unfortunate incident in September last year when Rutland County Council, without consulting anyone with knowledge, put out a press release warning people to look out for adders which were supposed to be multiplying all over the county. (In fact, there is only one definite site for adders in Rutland, at Ketton Quarry). Thanks to pressure from LARN members, the press release was later removed from the RCC website – though the damage may have been done.

Rutland Reptiles

Rather more reliable information on reptiles in Rutland comes from Dr Charles Gallimore, amphibian and reptile recorder for Rutland Natural History Society. His analysis of herps records in our smallest county, going back a hundred years, shows some interesting patterns.

Just looking at recent years, slow-worm records have been concentrated in the parishes of Burley and Clipsham, with scattered records elsewhere. Common lizards have been found especially in Clipsham, Ketton and Tickencote, and rarely anywhere else. Adders, of course, have only been spotted at Ketton. In contrast, grass snakes have been recorded particularly in Oakham, Hambleton, Empingham, Braunston and Barrowden parishes, and many other places.

Next time – where the amphibians are to be found in Rutland.

Herps Data

During 2007, the amphibian and reptile distributional data we have collected has been used for many development Environmental Impact Assessments, the M1 widening study, Newtown Linford Village Design Statement (for probably our most herps-rich parish) and for drafting of the North-West Leicestershire Biodiversity Action Plan.

Climate Change

Climate change can be expected to have an impact on the herpetofauna just as for other wildlife. Predictions for the UK include a rise in temperatures, decrease in precipitation, wetter winters and drier summers, and more severe storm events.

Likely impacts on reptiles include a longer active season with shorter hibernation and earlier breeding; a shorter time for egg development, perhaps with an effect on sex ratios of young; fire threat in drier habitats; impacts on prey; and conditions benefiting non-native species. The adder and lizard, being northern species, will lose “climate space” (most favourable climatic conditions), whilst the slow-worm and grass snake are southern species and may benefit (though the latter’s wetland habitats may be affected).

Amphibians will also see a longer active season and faster egg development with a shortening of the duration of the tadpole stage. There will be drought threats to breeding ponds; impacts on prey; a greater incidence of diseases; and again, non-natives will benefit. Great crested newts and palmate newts may prefer the warmer conditions, whilst the toad, being a northern species, may suffer.

If you detect any changes in herp behaviour that may be due to climate change, do let me know.

Amphibian Fungal Disease

Edward Brede at the Institute of Zoology is working on the incidence of Chytridiomycosis in UK amphibian populations. This is a virulent fungal disease that has

hit amphibians across the world. He is looking for samples of dead amphibians – you need to put them in a freezer, send details to Froglife (9 Swan Court, Cygnet Park, Hampton, Peterborough PE7 8GX – info@froglife.org), then contact Edward via email (Edward.Brede@ioz.ac.uk) or on 020 7449 6438 for instructions.

Environmental Stewardship

The Environmental Stewardship agri-environment schemes – ELS (Entry Level Stewardship) and HLS (Higher Level Stewardship) – can bring payments to farmers for undertaking works which benefit great crested newts (and other amphibians). A new leaflet entitled “How great crested newts can gain Stewardship points for your farm” has been produced to guide farmers down this route. The leaflet is available from Natural England or via the HCT website (www.herpconstrust.org.uk), under “Documents”.

Surveys

The surveys “Snakes Alive”, “Spawn Spot” and “Pondamonium” are still running – see the Holly Hayes website for details (www.leics.gov.uk/celebratingwildlife.htm). We are hoping to initiate a great crested newt survey this year – if you are interested in helping, please do contact me.

Toads on Roads

The “Toads on Roads” campaign, aimed at preventing mass mortalities on the roads as toads return to their breeding ponds, is being re-invigorated. Three sites have been registered in our two counties: Coleorton (where the crossing point has now been provided with a toad tunnel), Ashby Magna and Uppingham. If you know of any other site which would benefit from a toad patrol, please let me know.

If you have any news for the next edition of this newsletter, do let me know.

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