

Leicestershire Amphibian and Reptile Network



*Newsletter No. 24
September 2014*

Our First Melanistic Grass Snake?

Michael Jeeves passed this on. A local farmer saw a snake with seven young on an allotment compost heap near Orchard Farm, Plungar. The snake was completely black with a red collar – he wondered what it was. The mention of young at a compost heap makes one think immediately of grass snake. There are certainly records of black (melanistic) grass snakes, though not, apparently, in Leicestershire. It may be that this genetic abnormality has the effect not only of turning the majority of the animal black, but also turning the grass snake's yellow collar to a red colouration. (Incidentally, a grass snake may be attracted by the fact that one of the streets of Plungar is named Frog Lane!).

Danger!

Apologies to those of you who may have tried to contact me over the summer without success. I was away in Australia for three months, visiting my daughter in Melbourne. It was winter down-under so reptiles and amphibians were not much in evidence there. I did buy a book of Australian reptiles – they have a total of 760 species, and my book only covered 223 of the most common/striking species.

It is salutary to note that of the 100 or so snakes detailed in the book, only 24 were harmless or “non-venomous”. Of the rest, 34 were categorised as “venomous but not regarded as dangerous”, 7 were “venomous, a bite may require treatment”, and 36 were “venomous and dangerous, capable of inflicting a potentially fatal bite”. We are perhaps lucky to have only one venomous snake to sell to the public in this country! A recent NHS report states that there are 100 cases of adder bites reported every year. Since records began in 1876, 14 people are believed to have died from adder bites, the last in 1975.

On the other hand, if you like frogs, Australia is the place to be. The country has no tailed amphibians, lacking either newts or salamanders. The amphibian fauna of Australia is thus represented by some 220 frogs and one introduced toad – the cane toad, a major pest in north-east Australia due to its highly poisonous nature to native animals.

Toadlet Invasion

Richard Iliffe reported the following interesting observations:

“ I thought you would be interested to hear about toadlets invading my house in Hinckley. On 18th July about 11.30pm I was closing the TV down prior to going to bed when I noticed what I first thought to be a large spider skipping under a sofa in my lounge. I moved the sofa and was amazed to find a tiny toadlet, as small as we ever see them. I caught it in a plastic pill-box and placed it in the garden near my garden pond. The following night I found another at midnight, also in the lounge in the same spot, and at 2.45am I happened to get up and found a couple more in my hall/reception area – both heading for the lounge! All were caught and deposited outside near the pond. I was surprised at how lively they were, and how difficult to catch, travelling in a series of very rapid small jumps rather than crawling like adult toads do.

During the hot weather I leave a connecting door to my garage open to improve air circulation and I guess this is how they accessed the house as they could easily get into the garage under the main door. Overall they had to negotiate 3.5 metres of garage concrete floor, climb a 7.5cm step, and then crawl/jump a total distance of 10 metres of carpet through my entrance hall, reception area and into the lounge to the point where I caught them. There is no possible way they could have escaped from the lounge as they would have come up to the closed patio doors overlooking the garden pond.

There are several aspects that I can't understand. Firstly they approach my house from the street frontage across tarmac with no grassland or ponds anywhere near, as far as I know, so where do they come from? They appear to be confidently heading directly towards my garden pond but why come through the house when there are paths around the side? When in the house they could take two other shorter routes which would be on a direct route towards the pond but they preferred to pass by two open doors, adding an unnecessary 3 to 6 metres to their journey, and then turning into the open lounge door. Unanswered questions include how many others have made or tried to make this journey through the house and not been seen (though I have searched for bodies and can find none). The other question is whether they always make these mini-migrations at night rather than in daylight?



The experience continued on 22nd July when I had two further catches at 10.30pm, this time in my kitchen which is on the shortest route from front of house to rear garden, then two more at 11.30pm and 12.30am on 23rd, this time in the lounge, then yet another at

2.30am also in the lounge, but in this case the specimen was desiccated and barely alive and covered in carpet fluff so it had obviously been in the house for some time – I cleaned it up and placed it in vegetation near my pond but doubt whether it would have survived.

By this time I was becoming a bit disenchanted with these ‘invaders’ and started checking that all doors were closed. Things quietened down, possibly because we had a prolonged spell of hot dry weather rather than because doors were closed. Finally I caught another in the kitchen at 11.30pm on 2nd August, and then another in the lounge at 10.15pm on 5th August. This latter was fresh and in excellent and lively condition and had somehow negotiated two firmly closed doors between garage and house! How do they do it?

I am at a loss to answer the many questions that these creatures bring to mind. I know that young frogs and toads migrate from the water where they developed from tadpoles, but if they are doing this why are they apparently heading towards my garden pond – as far as I know toads live in damp crevices, or in damp soil and under vegetation, not in water. So what is the attraction of my pond, if in fact that is where they are heading?”

Terror-pins

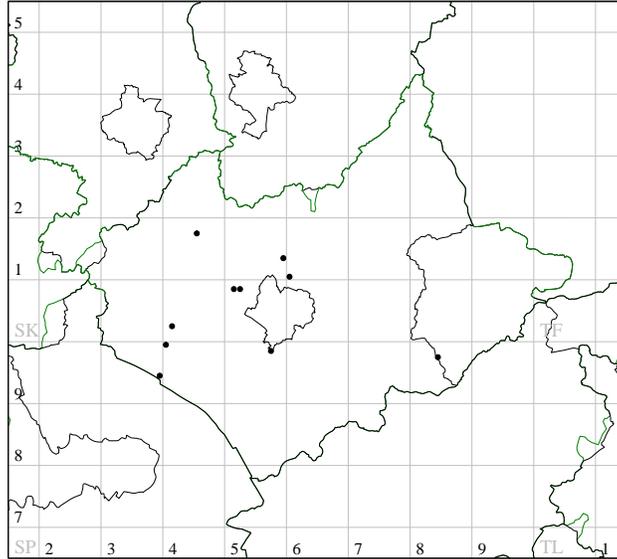
It is not often that reptiles make the front pages, but in the Ashby Times, 29 August 2014 edition, the headlines for the main front page article read “ASHBY CANAL NOW UNDER THREAT FROM TERRAPINS”.

The story highlighted the threat to the ecology of the Ashby Canal SSSI from red-eared terrapins which had been released there and which are apparently munching their way through the aquatic fauna. The Canal and River Trust (which took over the management of the canal system from British Waterways) is seeking volunteers to help catch the terrapins for re-housing.

They may be exaggerating the scale of the problem – only odd records of terrapins have come from the Ashby Canal – but it does highlight the damage caused by invasive alien species which are introduced into the countryside. The distribution of red-eared terrapin records is shown on the map below – any additional records would be very welcome.

The abandoned terrapins stem from the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles craze of the 1990s, when (small) pet terrapins were bought in large numbers, and later put out into the countryside when they reached dinner-plate size and proved difficult to keep in a standard aquarium. Now, a new TMNT film is coming out (why?) – let us hope it does not lead to a similar pet-craze followed by abandoned-pet problem.

Red-eared Terrapin (*Chrysemys scripta*)



Species Focus: the Palmate Newt

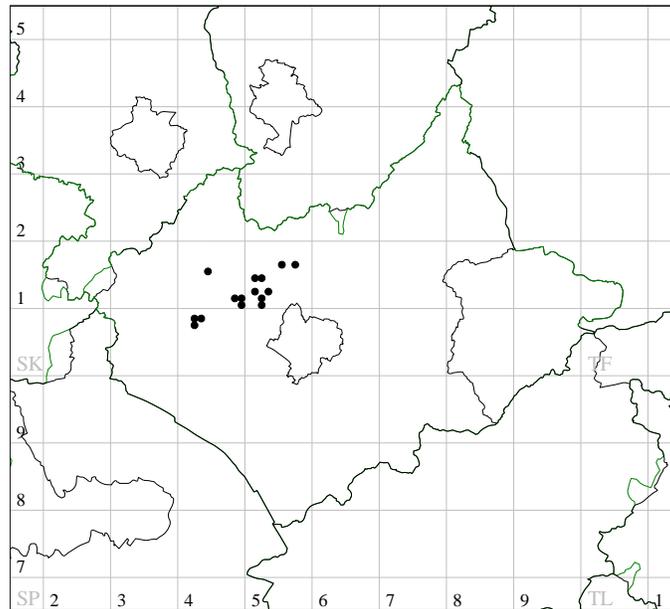
Palmate newts have always been about the rarest of the herpetofauna in Leicestershire and Rutland, but recently there have been a number of sites positive for the species, where palmates have been reported and confirmed, often with photographs. For the record, current sites, with palmate newts present since 2012, seem to be:

- Beacon Hill – the best-reported site, with palmates in Frying Pan Pond and Frank's Pit
- Old John Watering, and perhaps elsewhere in Bradgate Park
- Stinking Wood, Markfield
- Stoneywell, the new National Trust site
- Charnwood Lodge (continuing presence confirmed in 2014)

Any other definite records would be welcomed. In particular, it would be interesting to know the status at Nailstone Colliery where there were several records of palmates in 2007. The map below gives rather a false picture as it includes a number of sites where palmate newts have apparently been lost in recent years.



Palmate Newt (*Triturus helveticus*)



Herps Introductory Pack

I have produced an Introductory Pack for those just beginning to take an interest in amphibians and reptiles in Leicestershire and Rutland. The contents include: a check-list of species for the vice-county; a county atlas; references; places to visit; local contacts; a sheet of identification tips; and a sample LARN newsletter. Copies of the pack are available from me, or on the Naturespot website under “Resources”.

Stoneywell

LARN 23 detailed the concerns for the future of a large slow-worm population at Stoneywell, the National Trust’s new property in Charnwood Forest. Thankfully, these concerns have been picked up by Carl Hawke, the NT Wildlife and Countryside Adviser in the Midlands. Carl is preparing a wildlife garden plan which should ensure that the needs of slow-worms will be taken into account in future management of the garden.

The plan also addresses the requirements of birds, bats and other mammals, and, most interestingly, amphibians. A recent survey has confirmed the presence of both smooth newt and the rare (in Leicestershire – see “Species Focus” above) palmate newt. In a visit to Stoneywell in March this year, I was lucky enough to see both a slow-worm and a couple of palmate newts as well as a smooth newt. Both species of newts inhabit a deep and featureless cold-plunge pool with little vegetation – a most unlikely habitat.

Up and Coming

Earlier in the year, I was contacted by a young man, Nathan Bach, who is fascinated by newts. He contacted LARN to find out where he could see palmate newts; he was put in touch with Carl Hawke, conservation adviser with the National Trust, who kindly introduced him to the palmates at Stoneywell. Nathan has also worked with the Wildlife Trust on great crested newts (see the latest Wildlife News for more details of Nathan's exploits), and he contacted CBBC to explain his interest in newts. Now CBBC are going to film Nathan at a GCN translocation site in Middlesbrough. Definitely someone to watch out for!

Checklist Update

The checklist of species circulated with LARN Newsletter No. 22 is, inevitably, in need of an update. This includes confirmation of the following species:

- Adders at Oadby (and possibly Launde and Shawell)
- Palmate newts at Stinking Wood (Markfield), Old John Watering (Bradgate Park) and Charnwood Lodge
- Alpine newt at two gardens in south-east Leicester
- A suggestion, not yet confirmed, of Italian crested newts at Oakham

In addition, one species has now changed its scientific name:

- Common lizard is now *Zootoca vivipara*

Matthew's Records

I am always grateful to receive information from herps recorders in the two counties. One of my most consistent correspondents is Matthew Billings, who sent me his 2013 records with highlights picked out.

These include notes on the reptiles of Bradgate Park: a high count of 8 slow-worms on 21st April, a large brown female adder (the biggest he had ever seen) on 28th July, and, amongst several common lizards, the same individual shedding its skin on the 7th and 12th September. There was also a gathering of three juvenile lizards and a young grass snake basking together on 18th September.

Visits to Leire Field Pond produced GCNs, and an adult was seen feasting on a drowned Emperor Dragonfly on 18th July. Matthew found one Palmate Newt at the Frying Pan Pond, and witnessed courtship behaviour of both palmates and smooth newts at Old John Watering. He confirmed, from local spawning observations, that 2013 was a very late year.

Amorous Adders

Steve Woodward's excellent photo of a mating pair of adders in Bradgate Park encouraged the Leicester Mercury to wax lyrical in April, with a headline above the photo stating "Amorous Adders Get Personal in Bradgate Park". In what was actually a rather positive article (not playing up the "dangers" of adders, as often happens), the Mercury spoke to Peter Tyldesley, the Park's land agent, about reptile surveys which are intended to help prevent damage to what is a rare species in the county. Steve's picture is below.



Missing Edge Pieces

Great crested newts are found in nearly every 10-Km square covering L&R – the species only fails to be recorded in a few part-squares right at the edge of our counties, as follows:

- SK 20 – Honey Hill (near No Mans Heath)
- SK 21 – Chilcote
- SK 32 – Staunton Harold Hall/Spring Wood
- SP 48 – Claybrooke Magna and Parva
- SK 43 – Sawley Marina/Hemington Fields/Lockington Grounds
- SP 57 – Catthorpe/Swinford/Shawell Grange/Stanford Hall
- SK 74 – River Devon
- SK 84 – the topmost point of Leics: Normanton/Normanton Lodge

If anyone has GCN records (or sightings of any other herps) from these squares, they would be very gratefully received.

Police Contacts

Leicestershire Police Force's new Police Wildlife Crime Officer is Sgt. Paul Howland, based at Market Harborough police station. Sharon Roscoe, at Melton police station, also has an interest. They should be useful people to contact in the case of illegal activities in relation to protected species (eg GCN).

Cats and Herps

Cats get into trouble for chasing birds, but they are also a threat to amphibians. Neighbours' cats will certainly have a go at frogs in our garden pond. My mother recently sent me a cutting from her local Oswestry paper regarding cats killing GCNs at new ponds intended to compensate for the destruction of a breeding pond when a new community centre was built. Do send me any stories of cat/herps interactions.

Conundrum

Whilst clearing some fly-tipped material from a green lane in Snarestone, Katrina Measures and her husband uncovered six GCNs hiding under the rubbish. This raised the question of whether this provides a good argument for removing the fly tipping, as the Measures hope – or whether, by moving material under which GCNs are sheltering, it is committing an offence against a species which has full legal protection (including protection against disturbance of its habitat)! Common sense should prevail!

Brief Notes

iRecord (a wildlife recording website) holds a sighting, backed up by photos, of Italian crested newts *Triturus carnifex* at a site in Oakham. This needs to be confirmed as it would be a new (alien) species for our counties.

Extensive newt fencing at Bardon Hill, in advance of further mineral development, has caught 2000 newts – Neill Talbot has details. (The Minorca opencast site near Measham apparently caught 1000 GCNs in 2012).

Leicestershire and Rutland Recorder No. 10, 2014 is now available, price £5, from the Wildlife Trust – good value for a well-produced journal. It includes an Amphibian and Reptile Checklist, as well as articles covering the whole range of natural history in L&R.

My thanks go to Anne Heaton for proof-reading and criticising early versions of these newsletters.

HWM

The next Herpetofauna Workers Meeting will be held on 7 and 8 February 2015 – venue somewhere in the north-east.

Watch Out For Dragonflies

Whilst exploring the places where amphibians live, you may also become aware of the habitat's importance for dragonflies. A new "Atlas of Dragonflies in Britain and Ireland", edited by Steve Cham et al (2014), gives a mass of information on the 56 British species. Comparisons with the previous atlas from 1996 allow an account of trends, the group apparently being much influenced by climate change, as well as by variations in pond numbers. The new atlas is recommended for anyone with an interest in wetlands.

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Leicestershire Amphibian and Reptile Network (LARN) is an informal grouping of people interested in the status and distribution of these two lower vertebrate groups in Leicestershire and Rutland. The group is held together by a newsletter produced on an irregular basis – generally twice a year. The aims of the group are to encourage recording of herpetofauna in the two counties, and to use this data to support conservation initiatives. Anyone wanting to join the group should contact the coordinator, Andrew Heaton, as below.

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

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