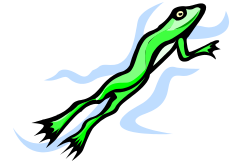


Leicestershire Amphibian and Reptile Network



*Newsletter No. 25
February 2015*

Index

I have put together a simple index of articles, by subject, that have appeared in the LARN newsletter, from the very first one (January 1999) to this issue. This index is presented here as an annex to Newsletter 25.

LARN Newsletters from number 10 to the present are all available on the LARN page on the Naturespot website (<http://www.naturespot.org.uk/home>). Newsletters 1 to 9 seem to have disappeared as electronic versions; I have paper copies, which I am in the process of scanning. When they are available, I will let you know.

Herps and Birds

Matthew Billings reports, as one of his highlights of 2014, seeing, on 13th June at Bradgate Park, a buzzard clutching a snake (unidentified), soaring over the park. In an article in The Grebe (the Leicestershire and Rutland Ornithological Society newsletter) dated January 2014, I listed several interactions between reptiles/amphibians and birds, as follows.

“Herons in particular are prodigious predators of amphibians, but Crows, Black-necked Grebe, Bittern, Spoonbill and Marsh Harrier all feed regularly upon amphibians. This applies to adult Frogs, Toads (though Toads have some resistance through toxins produced in the skin), and adult newts (including the fully protected Great Crested Newt) which are taken by Herons, Kingfishers and ducks. Dippers will take tadpoles, and Blackbirds have been known to pick off frog tadpoles from the edge of a pond.

Of the reptiles, snakes are a food source for a range of predatory birds (and mammals). Springwatch 2013 at Ynys-hir, in mid-Wales, showed Grass Snakes as prey, with a Buzzard regularly bringing them to the nest (Frogs were also fed to young Buzzards). Springwatch also showed an adult Grass Snake swimming at full speed to avoid the attentions of a Grey Heron – a Heron is big enough to deal with an adult Grass Snake, which can grow to a metre long; its patient hunting technique around the edges of waterbodies mean this water-loving reptile, just as much as the amphibians, needs to be vigilant to avoid being taken.

Hoopoes specialise in preying upon lizards; Kestrels and Pheasants are also known to take lizards. Montague's Harrier, Buzzard, Carrion Crow and Raven take both amphibians and reptiles, as do the shrikes, Red-backed Shrike and Great Grey Shrike; the latter creates a larder of stored prey on thorns, amongst which they will hang Lizards, though when the shrikes are present in Britain, in winter, herpetofauna will be hibernating.

On the other hand, herpetofauna will occasionally act as predators of birds. Again, Springwatch 2013 at Ynys-hir showed a Grass Snake as a predator at a Meadow Pipit nest, making quick work of a brood of nestlings. The Grass Snake is unusual in its "grab and swallow" feeding technique. Many non-venomous snakes constrict their prey and swallow once it is immobile; Grass Snakes swallow prey alive, as demonstrated graphically by the BBC camera. Adders take chicks of ground-nesting birds (and small mammals) using their venom injected through two fangs; the snake follows the trail of the dying animal and swallows it when immobilised.

A number of alien species of herpetofauna have been introduced to our two counties. There are concerns that the Red-eared Terrapin, found at half a dozen sites, takes small birds amongst other species of native fauna which it preys upon. So too might the American Bullfrog, if it were to become established."

Moira That, Please

Moira, North West Leicestershire, with its dry heath-type habitats, is a stronghold of the common lizard. A sighting of a lizard by Graham Bowers in August last year, at Hicks Lodge, fills in a further gap in the Moira jigsaw. There had previously been records from Newfield Colliery, Stonepits (both adjacent to Hicks Lodge), Conkers and Donisthorpe Woodland Park.

More Amorous Adders

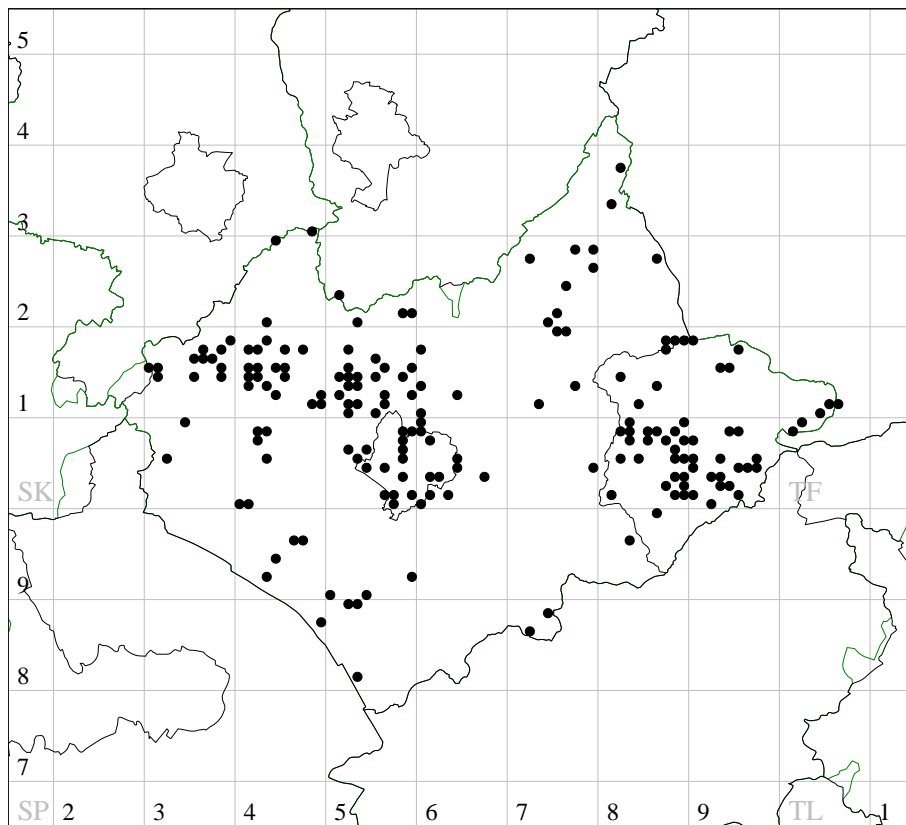
Following Steve Woodward's excellent photos of mating adders at Bradgate. (see newsletter 24), Matthew Billings, in his personal review of herp surveying in 2014, describes the following encounter as being his highlight of the year. It took place at Bradgate Park on 18th April.

"I observed a male & female Adder curled in courtship for over an hour, with another four males in attendance all jostling for position. The main male easily maintained his position as the largest of the pack and only concerned himself with the competing grey males once or twice. Meanwhile the scent of the brown female had sent them into a frenzy of tongue flicking and chasing around through the grass and over the path. This spectacle treated myself and the increasing collection of interested walkers to an amazing display."

Species Focus: Smooth Newt

As the LARN Index makes clear, there has never, in the newsletter's history, been an article devoted to the smooth newt – the only amphibian or reptile living in our two counties to be so neglected. So here is an overview of the local status of the common or smooth newt. The distribution map demonstrates that the smooth newt is widespread in L&R, taking to the smallest of ponds and frequently found in gardens. It is probably our most common herpetofauna species, after the frog. The only gaps in distribution in the two counties – principally Melton, Harborough and Hinckley & Bosworth – crop up in many distribution maps, no matter what the species, and reflect a lack of recording in those areas rather than a paucity of newts.

Smooth Newt (*Triturus vulgaris*)



Legislation

LARN 24 gave information on the new Police Wildlife Officers, effectively the enforcers of wildlife legislation. It is probably worthwhile giving a reminder of legislation as it applies to the native amphibians and reptiles in Britain. The core legislation is the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, amended by subsequent enactments. In brief:

Amphibians

Great crested newt: fully protected (offence to injure, kill, disturb, capture, keep or sell; or damage/destroy habitats in which it lives).

Frog, toad, smooth newt, palmate newt: partially protected (offence to sell).

Reptiles

Grass snake, adder, slow-worm, common lizard: partially protected (offence to injure, kill or sell).

In addition, the great crested newt has European Protected Species status, fulfilling commitments of the European “Habitats Directive”.

Other legislation (NERC Act 2006) places a duty on public authorities to conserve biodiversity – the list of species of principal importance includes toad, GCN and all the reptiles.

The UK Biodiversity Action Plan (1998, updated 2007) lists species for which specific action plans would be prepared – these priorities also include toad, GCN, and all four reptiles.

TV Star

Congratulations to LARN member Nathan Bach, (see also newsletter 24), who appeared on CBBC’s Saturday morning WILD programme on 18th October, dispensing facts on newts, and helping move great crested newts out of harm’s way on a building site on Teeside.!

Neill and Kay

It’s farewell to Neill Talbot and Kay Snowden, both LARN members, who are leaving this part of the world to move to Bristol. Both have been much involved with amphibian/reptile surveys in Leicestershire and Rutland. For example, Neill, who works for the Wildlife Trust, has recently been surveying reptiles in Bradgate Park and elsewhere. Our best wishes for the future go with them; they will be hard to replace.

Place Names

In LARN 24, I mentioned, as a complete aside, that there was a Frog Lane in Plungar. This made me wonder about other herpetological place names in Leicestershire and Rutland. The obvious one is Frog Island, in the north-west of the city, near the Wildlife Trust offices. I looked through the index in a Leicestershire Street Atlas (dated 2009) in our local library. It turns out that Frog Lane (Plungar) and Frog Island are in fact the only examples of herpetological street names in L&R. This is in sharp contrast with the 30+ streets with “fox” in their name, and the 11 streets, closes and lanes named after badgers.

A close reading of “Place-names of Leicestershire and Rutland” by Jill Bourne, backed up by “The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-names” by Eilert Ekwall, revealed that there were no settlements in our two counties with herpetological origins to their name. This is not the case for all counties – Dorset has several villages entitled “Frogmore” meaning “frog lake or pool”, and there are Frog examples elsewhere. The only other herps names are misleading, not referring to the animals: The Lizard in Cornwall means “high court”, while Lizard Hill in Shropshire derives from “hall by a hill” (from the Welsh “llys garth”). Again, there are eleven different Fox names (including Foxton in Leics), and other animals which bestow their names on settlements include snails (Snailwell in Cambridgeshire).



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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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