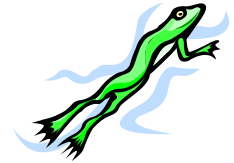


Leicestershire Amphibian and Reptile Network



Newsletter No. 26
November 2015

Early Newsletters Available

LARN Newsletters 1 to 9 (dated 1999-2004), which had disappeared as electronic versions, have now been scanned from paper copies and are available from me if requested. Numbers 10 to the present are all available on the LARN page on the Naturespot website: <http://www.naturespot.org.uk/home>

The Index of articles in the LARN newsletters, which was first circulated with the last issue (No. 25), will be updated with each edition of the newsletter. However, I only intend to send the most up-to-date index out every six or so issues. Between such dates, I will supply copies of the latest index to anyone who requests one.

Identification of Alien Newts

Alien newts have been found in Leicestershire in recent years – Alpine Newts may be dwelling in the Botanic Gardens at Oadby, as well as gardens along nearby streets, just into the city, and beside the M1 at Kirby Muxloe. Italian Crested Newts have been reported from Oakham. Marbled Newts, a distinctive species, have apparently not been seen in L&R yet, but may turn up thanks to people illegally introducing them. Just in case any of these species crops up in your part of the two counties, it might be useful to have some information on identifying the potentially-invasive species.

Alpine Newts (*Ichthyosaura alpestris*) are of medium size, between a smooth newt and a GCN in size. They have a blue-black colouration on the back. The undersides are deep yellow-orange-red, with no spots this is diagnostic, distinguishing them from native newts. They have a dry granular skin.

Italian Crested Newts (*Triturus carnifex*) are large dark newts very similar in size and appearance to GCN (indeed they were formerly considered a sub-species of GCN) but with less warty skin, more obvious dark spots, and no white stippling on the flanks. Females and juveniles often have orange or yellow vertebral stripes. The undersides are orange-red, with large black spots; the throat is dark with small white spots.

Marbled Newts (*Triturus marmoratus*) have not yet appeared in L&R, though found in garden ponds elsewhere. Their back pattern is an obvious black marbling against a bright yellow/green background. They have an orange stripe along the back. The undersides are marbled grey, brown or pinkish. They are the size of a GCN. A breeding male has a body crest and tail crest separated by a small gap. Females have orange vertebral stripes.

Good photographs of each of these species are to be found in the Wildguide “Britain’s Reptiles and Amphibians” by Howard Inns. As ever, any sightings of apparently non-native amphibians and reptiles in Leicestershire and Rutland will be welcomed, especially if accompanied by a photo.

What’s in a Name?

The Victoria County History of Leicestershire, published in 1907, with its section on “Reptiles and Batrachians” written by Maurice Browne, gives a list of alternative names for the herpetofauna, as used in Leicestershire in Victorian times. For interest, these were as follows:

Principal Name:	Alternative/Local Names:
Common Lizard	Scaly Lizard, Viviparous Lizard
Blind-Worm or Slow-Worm	Slow-Worm
Viper	Adder, Hether
Common Frog	No alternative names
Common Toad	No alternative names
Great Crested or Warty Newt	Warty Eft, Effet
Common or Smooth Newt	Common Newt, Effet, Asker, Smooth-skinned Eft

It is interesting that the Palmate Newt was not mentioned at all in the VCH. The species was differentiated from the Smooth Newt in 1789, by Grigory Kirillovich Razumovsky, a geologist, botanist and zoologist from a Russian noble family (though he lost his Russian status in 1811, due to his political dissent, and was taken into the Bohemian nobility, becoming a Count of the Austrian Empire). Yet, even by the time of the VCH publication, 118 years later, the Palmate Newt was apparently still not recognised as a separate species in Leicestershire.

The other point to note is the Victorian use of the term “batrachians”, rather than “amphibians”. Batrachian comes from the Greek “*batrakhos*”, meaning “frog”. Amphibian is derived from Greek “*amphi*”, “on both sides” and “*bios*”, meaning “life”.

Moira Lizards

Many thanks to Kristian Kirkwood for reporting his sighting of a common lizard in the Spring Cottage area in September, at one of the western-most points of Leicestershire. This adds yet another one to the cluster of lizard sites around the Moira area.

Buzzard and Snake

As if to follow up the article in the last LARN newsletter on birds and herpetofauna, Martin Vaughan saw, and took an excellent photograph of, a buzzard flying over Hicks Lodge near Moira, clutching a snake in its claws. This was on 15 April 2015. From the slim proportions of the snake, and the dark patches you can see down its flanks at maximum magnification, it appears probable that this was a grass snake. The photo is shown below (at a small size).



Strangely, another instance of a buzzard carrying a snake, this time at Bradgate Park, was reported in the Leics & Rutland Ornithological Society newsletter, dating from May 2015. Again, on this birds and herps theme, Charles Gallimore reminds us that, in the November 2014 edition of "British Birds", a study of pairs of honey buzzards found frogs to be a substantial part of their diet.

Stoke Golding Adder

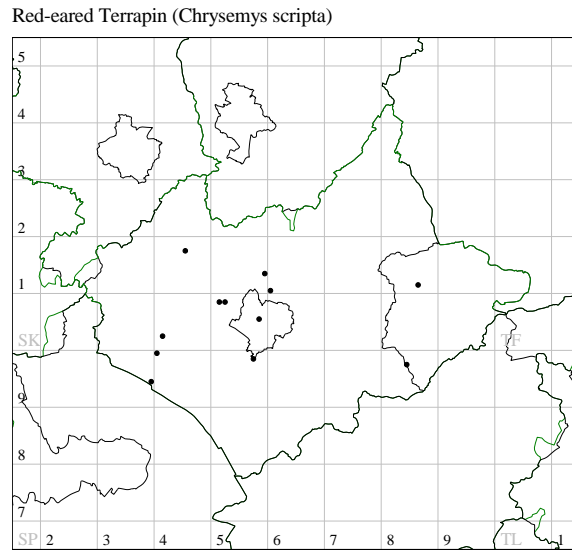
The received wisdom is that we only have two definite populations of adders, at Bradgate and Ketton. But other records do crop up from time to time, elsewhere around the two counties. Some of these must be due to mistaken identity or wishful thinking. However, there do appear to be a small number of apparently good records away from the usual haunts, such as the adders photographed at Oadby in 2013. Now another solid record has appeared in the form of a squashed (apparently by traffic) corpse of an adder found at Stoke Golding in October by Graham Payne. This specimen was passed on by Dave Marriott to Sue Timms and to myself. It certainly seems to be an adder crushed by a heavy weight, probably a large female, about 87 cm long. It is highly unexpected, though, as there have never been any previous records of adders from the Stoke Golding area. If anyone has knowledge of secret adder populations in the south of Leicestershire, I would be delighted to be informed (confidentially if necessary). The attached photos show the squashed specimen. I take it people do agree it was an adder?

Photos of the Stoke Golding squashed adder.



Species Focus: Red-eared Terrapin

Red-eared terrapins are found scattered in small numbers across the two counties as the map below shows.



Red-eared Terrapin *Trachemys scripta elegans*

Introduction. Occasional records, mainly of single animals (eg Cossington, Ashby Canal, Blackbrook Reservoir, Eyebrook Reservoir) and larger numbers of up to 5 (Groby Pool).

The first Red-eared Terrapin (or Red-Eared Slider) to crop up in Rutland, according to Charles Gallimore, was one seen once only in 2015 on the Oakham Canal at Burley, near the Ashwell prison.

A workshop at the Herpetofauna Workers Meeting 2015 on red-eared terrapins questioned whether they were really a problem, and whether anything needs to be done about them. The general consensus seemed to be that, as they cannot successfully reproduce in the British climate, there is no urgent need to do anything to control them, as the nuisance will end when the present individuals reach the end of their lives, and they will not be replaced (due to currently stronger controls on release of aliens into the wild). However, it was also felt that some advisory literature might be useful.



Three Frogs on my Shield

St Helens, the parish church of Ashby de la Zouch, has (amongst many other interesting features) a number of stone shields set around the West Door. One of these has long caught my eye as it appears to feature three frogs (or possibly toads).

I wondered what the importance of frogs was to whoever had commissioned the stonework. The only relevant reference that I had come across was in “The Frog Book” by Russell Ash, which briefly noted that the Paris coat-of-arms has three frogs (hence the playful naming of the French as “Frogs” by the English).

The link to Ashby’s church still seemed obscure, so chasing this further, I consulted the “Wordsworth Complete Guide to Heraldry” by A C Fox-Davies. This stated in a chapter headed (rather inaccurately) “Reptiles” that the only reference to frogs or toads in heraldry related to the de Botreaux family, whose coat-of-arms was described as “Argent, three toads erect sable” – three black upright toads on a white background.

So it was likely to be the de Botreaux family that was commemorated by the West Door of St Helens – why should this be? The website www.europeanheraldry.org gave me the answer. The Baronacy of de Botreaux, with its display of three toads, was an additional title brought, by marriage, to the Hastings family – the Hastings of Ashby fame (builders of Ashby Castle and St Helens church)!

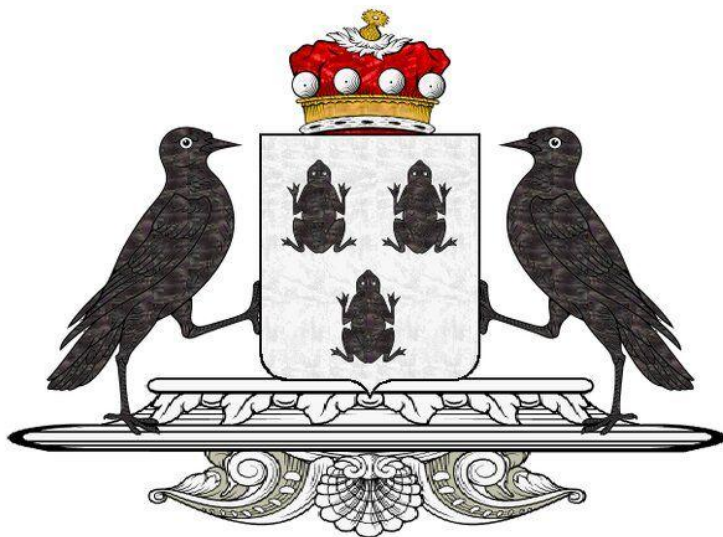
So, toads, not frogs after all – presumably there was a distinct intention to distinguish crepauuds from grenouilles – but the question remains, why did the de Botreaux family see a pattern of three toads as being significant enough to feature in their coat-of – arms?

The title “Baron Botreaux” came to the Hastings family through the marriage of Mary Hungerford, 5th Baroness Botreaux, to William Hastings in about 1478. The full significance of the de Botreaux family to Ashby’s church is for others to follow up - I will leave the genealogical work to those with that interest – but this story also illustrates the cultural significance that amphibians can have.

Having said that, further digging by myself and Brendon Clarke, a heraldry expert from Lancashire who visited St Helens recently, has taken the use of the three frogs/toads symbolism back, not just by the Botreaux, but to the Merovingian rulers of the Franks (from the 5th century for 300 years), and ultimately to a reference in the Bible. Revelations 16.13 refers to three toads acting as heralds for the forces of evil, mouthing the words of the Dragon, the Beast and the False Prophet. The question remains, why would any family choose such a dark image for their heraldic device?

Amphibians get a bad press again!

Three frogs/toads on St Helens Church, Ashby de la Zouch



The Botreaux family crest, featuring three frogs/toads and possibly two Cornish Choughs.

Herps from the Swinging Sixties

Ray Morris is undertaking a project to digitise all club/society newsletters relating to the natural history of Leicestershire and Rutland – contact Ray for more details: ray@cactusbob.net. All the LARN newsletters have been added to this digital collection. Interestingly, through his project, Ray has come across a couple of newsletters produced by the Leicestershire Herpetological Study Group in 1965/6. We forget how tricky it was to produce a duplicated document before word processors and computers and these typewritten newsletters are sometimes difficult to read now, especially the first. The second newsletter, from January 1966, has some interesting articles on pond loss, the first records of lizards outside Charnwood, and the then current statuses of the reptiles and amphibians. There will be a summary of these two newsletters in the next LARN publication; meanwhile does anyone recollect the LHSG and its activities? It only appears to have been short-lived, as just the two newsletters have survived. If anyone can throw any light on this group, please contact me.

Bracken at Bradgate

Earlier in the year, a concern was raised with me over the discovery of dead adders in Bradgate Park following rolling of areas of bracken to crush it and thus control its growth. Monocultures of bracken leave little room or habitat for other species and it must be managed (though there are some specialists which benefit from areas of bracken, such as fritillary butterflies). I put this concern to Mat Bateman, a Ranger with Bradgate Park Trust, and his reply highlighted the measures that had been taken. A survey of reptiles in Bradgate Park was carried out in 2014 by Neill Talbot of the Wildlife Trust, which led to the identification of hotspots of high reptile densities to be avoided, in turn helping fine-tune the bracken rolling programme. There is a continuing need to manage the bracken, so avoiding high-risk areas for reptiles whilst continuing the rolling programme is the best that can be done and this approach is accepted by Natural England. Mat also makes the point that some snake mortalities are actually down to dogs attacking snakes, which is difficult to police in an area such as Bradgate Park.

Water Vole Concerns

The Water Vole is one of the most threatened British species – over the last few decades, the great majority of the fairly numerous water vole populations have been lost, due to various pressures: degradation of habitats, flooding and above all, predation by American mink. This sad story for mammal-lovers should also be a concern to herpetologists: the complex subterranean tunnels created by water voles burrowing in the banks of watercourses provide refugia for grass snakes and amphibians. An article in “British Wildlife” (February 2015) gives some cause for optimism, as an analysis of reintroduction projects shows that restoration of water vole populations can be successful.

CEEP

The CEEP project (Community Education and Enterprise Projects Ltd), providing work to those difficult to employ, undertakes practical work and gardening/farming, woodland management and habitat creation, from a site just to the east of Ashby de la Zouch. They recently came to LARN for advice on management for amphibians. They have use of a triangle of land at Hall Farm, on the Ashby-Coalville road, which consists of rough grassland at the top, sloping down to the north end where it is very wet. The whole parcel of land probably covers a couple of hectares. In this rather nice pocket of habitat, they are keen to put in a cluster of new ponds, build a hibernaculum, and open up some dense woodland. I approved the plans as benefitting amphibians, whilst urging CEEP to invite the Wildlife Trust to look over the site to ensure that no habitat of outstanding floral value would be damaged by digging of the ponds.

Herpetofauna Workers Meeting

I attended (as did Neill Talbot and Kay Snowdon from LARN) the 2015 Herpetofauna Workers Meeting, held on a February weekend in Newcastle upon Tyne. It was the usual mix of interesting speaker sessions and workshops. The workshops I attended addressed problems with red-eared terrapins, and a risk-based approach to GCN conservation. Other presentations covered translocating and monitoring GCNs, creating herpetofauna habitat, developing a Habitat Suitability Index for adders, and a very worrying talk on the current state of Natural England: demoralised by over-reorganisation, loss of staff and lack of resources. All in all, it was a very enjoyable two days, and worth attending if you are able.

The 2016 HWM is to be held in Oxford on 6-7 February (Sat-Sun) - further details at:

www.arc-trust.org/HWM2016

Albinism

The Victoria County History (1907), records that at Eye Kettleby in 1905, some digging work turned up an albino grass snake “with eyes a bright ruby red”. The text stated that “Albinism has hitherto been entirely unknown in connexion with reptiles”. Is this so? Has anyone come across albino reptiles in Leicestershire, Rutland or elsewhere? I would be interested to hear of any examples.

Wildlife Trust News

The LRWT “Wildlife News” dated Spring/Summer 2015 carries information on the management of Cribbs Meadow nature reserve, including the creation of breeding sites for lizards. It also highlights the Nature Ranger Award given to Nathan (who has featured in the last couple of issues of LARN News) for his Great Crested Newt studies.

Leicestershire and Rutland Recorder No. 11, 2015 is on sale, with articles on a wide variety of local natural history topics.

Different Strokes for Different Folks

Everyone knows, of course, that the amphibian and reptiles are the most fascinating groups of animals – but other people have other interests, and require our understanding and sympathy!

There is only a small pool of naturalists in Leicestershire and Rutland taking an interest in fish (as opposed to the large numbers of recreational anglers, who have an obvious stake in maintaining a high quality water environment). As County Recorder for fish, I am intending – if and when I find the time – to produce another newsletter, similar to this one but devoted to the freshwater fish of Leicestershire and Rutland. This will probably come out just once a year. If you are interested in receiving this fish newsletter – or better still, if you are able to offer fishy articles or snippets for inclusion in the newsletter – do let me know.

On a different note again, the Leicestershire and Rutland Mammal Group has recently been launched, to encourage recording of mammals in our two counties. It is surprising that it has taken such a long time to set the group up – mammal groups are long-established in most of our adjacent counties. When surveying for herps, you may often come across mammals occupying the same habitats – otters, mink and water voles along watercourses, water shrews and rabbits or hares around field ponds, and so on. The new LRMG are keen to gather in as many as possible of these casual mammal sightings – the easiest way to submit your records is via the Naturespot website: (www.naturespot.org.uk).

Don't be afraid of noting these other groups – fish and mammals – when surveying for amphibians and reptiles – they need our help and interest!

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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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