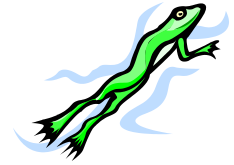


Leicestershire Amphibian and Reptile Network

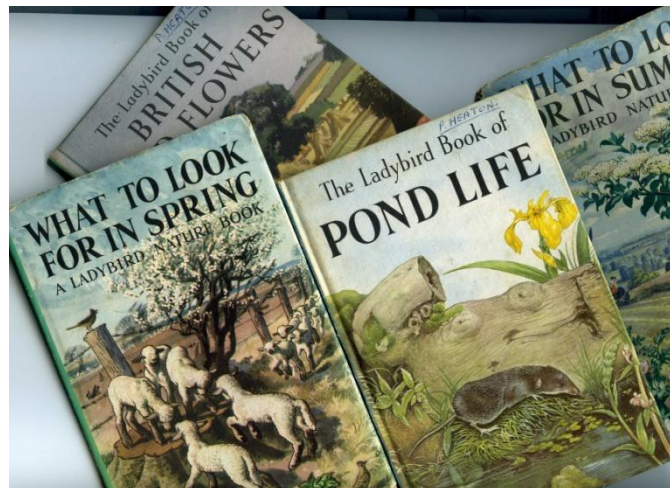


Newsletter No. 28
August 2016

Ladybird Special!

Amphibians and Reptiles in Ladybird Books

As I may soon be giving up (or at least reducing) my involvement with the LARN newsletter, perhaps I might be allowed a little indulgence. This edition of the newsletter focuses on a highly successful Leicestershire company, which also provided the baseline information supporting my early interest in natural history.



When a new field guide comes out in my areas of natural history interest, I have to buy it. This is probably a reaction to my very early days as a naturalist, growing up in Birmingham in the 1950/60s, and looking for guidance which recognised the true, bright colours of nature – whereas the books bought by my parents (many still retained), were dull, colourless things. Take “The Country Book” by E Golding – this tiny book was ridiculously comprehensive, running from seaweed to rural architecture – but all the illustrations were line drawings. Similarly, a favourite book of mine, with a portmanteau title that noted its varied interests – it really was called “Shore Life, Fish, Clouds and Weather” – lacked any colour in its explanatory drawings.

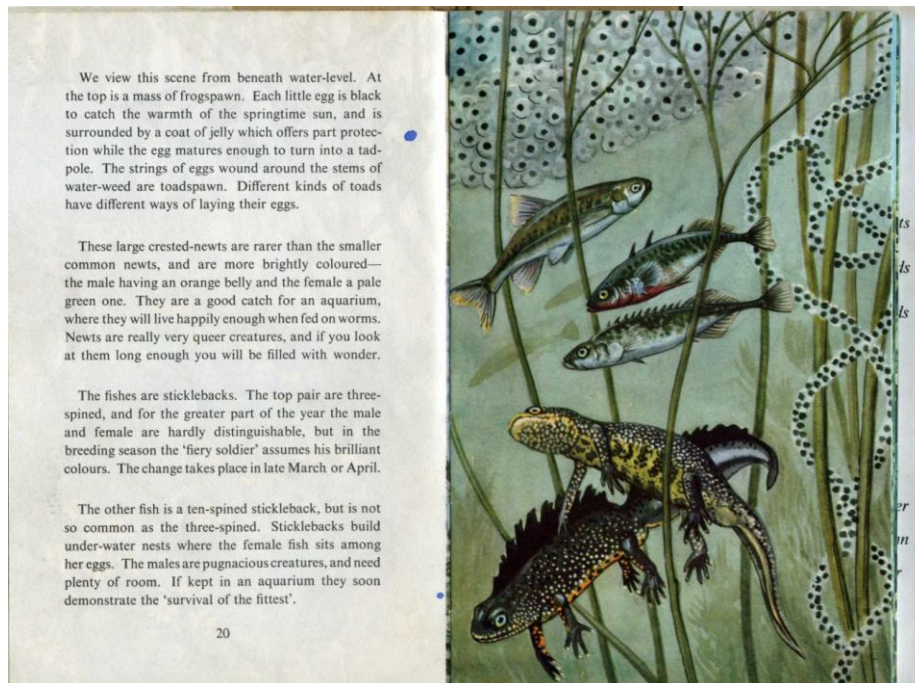
This need for colour may explain why I took so strongly to the Ladybird series of books – consistently excellent small guides to a wide range of subjects, with the intricate paintings taking up a whole page and sitting opposite the explanatory text, the

illustrations being produced by artists of the quality of such familiar names as CF Tunnicliffe and John Leigh-Pemberton.

Ladybird books are especially relevant to us in Leicestershire, as they were published by Wills and Hepworth Ltd, of Loughborough. This Leicestershire company (which later changed its name to Ladybird Books Ltd) was seeking, during WWI, to publish “pure and healthy literature for children”. They produced Ladybird books from 1915 to 1973 at their premises in Angel Yard, in the centre of Loughborough – now marked by a green plaque on the wall.

I well remember many Saturday mornings spent with my parents, taking my half-crown pocket money to the emporium that was the TASCOS* store in Stirchley, south Birmingham, where they actually had a revolving rack of Ladybirds, to purchase my latest title – perhaps “What to Look for in Spring”, or some other natural history subject. I loved these books and kept many to the present day (or, to give her credit, my mother, Pamela, held on to them). They now require a reappraisal – which is happening in the art world, linked to an exhibition of Ladybird titles which has been doing the rounds. My own reassessment relates to the way in which Ladybird books dealt with the amphibians and reptiles, which so often get a bad press.

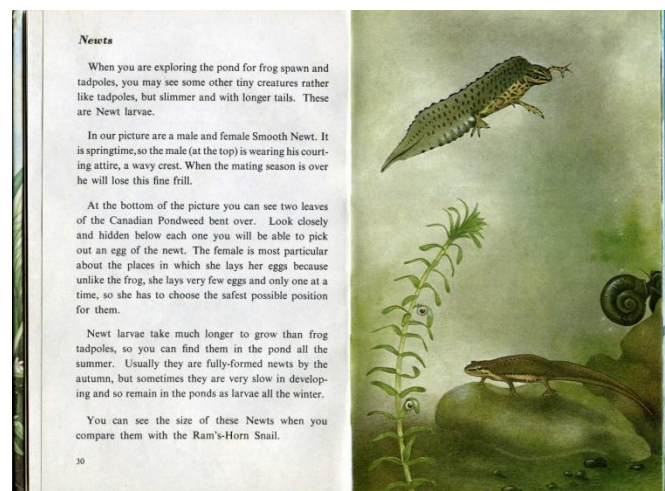
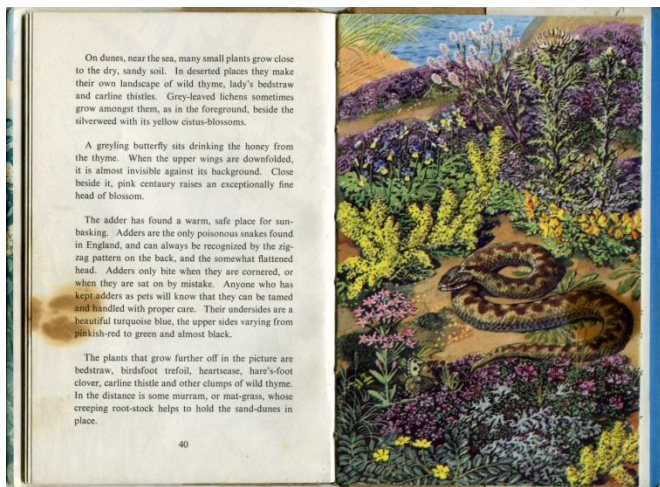
**Ten Acres and Stirchley Cooperative Society*



In fact, Ladybird gave considerable space to the less regarded taxonomic groups – herps, some of the less well known insects, lower plants – rather than concentrating on the popular birds, butterflies and flowers (which would perhaps have been more commercially advantageous). My favourite title was always “What to Look for in Spring”, which devotes a double-page spread (above) to amphibians (frogspawn, toad spawn, GCNs). A few pages later, in describing the life of a water shrew, it details the shrew’s

predatory interest in frogs, contrasting it with the mammal's anthropomorphically enjoyable musical abilities: "They are fierce animals and can attack creatures as large as full-grown frogs, which they do not trouble to kill, but eat alive. A horrid sight! In the springtime water shrews sometimes sit in twos and threes on a mudflat and sing – which they do very prettily."!

"What to Look for in Summer" carried a good piece on adders (below), depicted amongst dune heath habitat. As it says, "Adders only bite when they are cornered, or when they are sat on by mistake"! The suggestion that adders make good pets might not be expected today, however (this volume was first published in 1960). Other series looked at specific habitats or taxonomic groups. The Ladybird Book of Pond Life includes a section on frogs, toads and spawn, whilst another plate was devoted to the newts, with illustrations of male and female smooth newts (below).

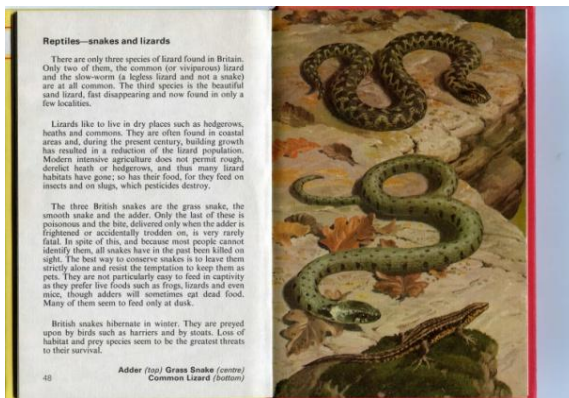
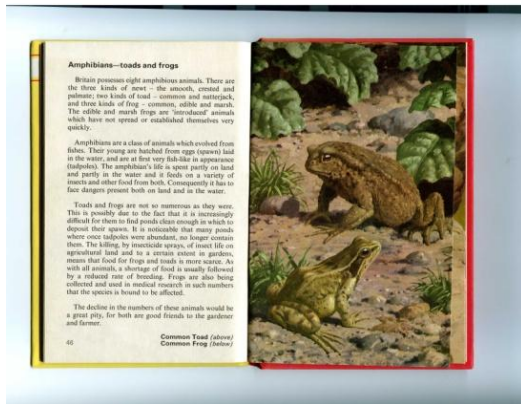


A later series on Conservation, published at the tail-end of the 1970s, produced some excellent text on various environmental issues, but the visual aspects were disappointing – rather bland, lifeless drawings scattered through the text rather than taking up a whole page. One volume, "Nature's Roundabout: an introduction to ecology" - a creative title,

and a fact-filled text that could almost be an undergraduate primer in this field – makes use of two of the lower vertebrates (grass snake and pike), identifying them as the top predators in their favoured habitat - well illustrated in a dramatic scene on the front endpapers (below). Another volume, “Nature in the Town” was more I-Spy than Ladybird, a catalogue of small photos (though it did include frog, GCN and lizard).



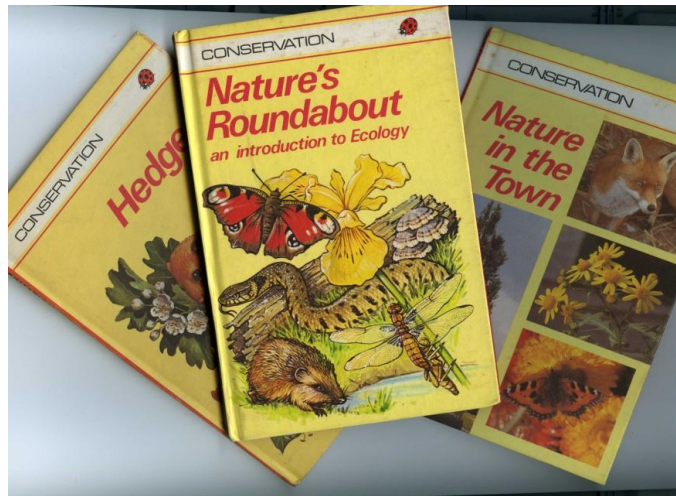
The final illustrations, below, come from a volume produced in 1972, artwork and text by John Leigh-Pemberton, entitled “Wildlife in Britain”. It gave a colourful overview of the subject, including plates relating to amphibians, reptiles (and fish), as shown.



The standard format of the best-known Ladybird books was, for ease of production, 4.5 x 7 inches, with 56 pages. From 1980, Ladybirds started to be produced in different formats, thus losing their distinct identity. Ladybird now survives only as an imprint of Penguin Children's Books.

A new "Ladybird" series has recently been produced, spoofs on the original titles aimed at adults, and they have sold well. Surely, though, the great days of Ladybird were in the 1950s to 1970s, when the classic size/picture/text combination provided inspiration and enlightenment to young naturalists!

Andrew Heaton



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This has been a special issue, spurred by my discovery of more Ladybirds in my loft than I realised I had kept! The "forthcoming items" listed in Newsletter no. 27 will now appear in edition 29, towards the end of the year.

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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.

Andrew Heaton, 19 Rydal Gardens, Ashby de la Zouch, Leics LE65 1FJ

Tel. 01530-467904

aheaton@ntlworld.com