



# Warwickshire Amphibian & Reptile Team

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Affiliated to the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust (Registered Charity Number 209200)  
and Herpetofauna Groups of Britain & Ireland.

Patron: Ken Livingstone

## WART NEWSLETTER: ISSUE NO. 28 AUTUMN 2001

*Forthcoming events*

### Annual General Meeting

**Tuesday 10th January 2002**

All WART members are invited to the Annual General Meeting, which will be held on Tuesday 10th January 2002 at Brandon Marsh Nature Centre.

Some of the current Committee members are intending to change roles and we are also looking for new committee members – contact Jan if you are interested.

The proposed Committee:

Chair  
Vice-Chair  
Secretary  
Membership Secretary  
Treasurer  
Newsletter Editor  
Ordinary members

Jan Clemons  
Andrew Thompson  
Andi Wolf  
Nigel Clemons  
Howard Eccles  
Helen Newell  
Jane O'Dell, Serena Eccles



# The Rarest Snake in Britain

The first time I saw a smooth snake (*Coronella austriaca*) was in May 1991. I was walking along a path on Canford Heath in Poole and saw a large female basking out in the open, oblivious to the fact that she was less than five metres away from the back gardens of a new, encroaching housing estate. Over the past ten years I have only ever seen one other smooth snake out in the open but have encountered many more under refugias and deep mature heather stands where they curl themselves around the stems, perfectly camouflaged against the background mosses and lichens on the heathland floor.

I learnt a lot from Anthony Braithwaite who taught me how to 'get my eye in' whilst the snakes were 'mosaic basking' on the heathland floor. Smooth snakes don't seem to follow the rules for spotting other reptiles, as they prefer to bask on more cloudy days. Refugias are undoubtedly the best way of finding smooth snakes but you must survey early or late in the day, otherwise it gets too hot for them under the refugias. Anthony's surveys on Surrey heaths used small squares of roofing felt and every snake caught was examined, measured and its head patterns recorded (a similar technique to Sylvia Sheldon's adder studies).

The smooth snake is unique to the touch as its scales lack keels. It is more slender than the adder, has a smaller head and lacks the distinctive dorsal zigzag. What I tune into is the 'Cleopatra' eyes, a dark streak like eyeliner running along each side of the head from nostril to eye which then slants down to the back of the mouth and for me confirms it as being a smooth snake. In my experience I very rarely handle snakes but when I was with the BHS Conservation Committee I had the opportunity to catch and handle smooth snakes for research purposes under licence from English Nature. I found out that smooth snakes readily bite when handled and do the bites bleed. However they didn't seem to bite Anthony!

Despite the BHS survey and latterly the work of the Herpetological Conservation Trust (HCT) we know little more than we did fifty years before. The species was only 'discovered' in 1853 and is now confined to Dorset, Hampshire and Surrey heathlands. A recent search of historic smooth snake sites in Berkshire found no trace of them.

It was always thought that the bulk of the smooth snake's diet was other reptiles and it is common to find smooth snakes in lizard habitat. However recent work has shown that reptiles only constitute 60% of its diet, small mammals and nestling birds making up the remainder.

Little is known about their reproductive behaviour due to their secretive nature but it is thought that they breed every two years. Smooth snakes are viviparous and are thought to give birth underground or in dense vegetation. Jonathan Webster, a trustee of the HCT once told me that he once saw a newly born clutch of smooth snakes in the process of rupturing their egg membranes in deep vegetation but the mother was nowhere to be seen. There seems to be no evidence that such a reptile specialist eats her own offspring!

Smooth snakes are also long-lived and several snakes on Studland Heath in Dorset have been known to survive for 18-19 years. Perhaps the secret of its success is its secretive nature? On the continent the smooth snake is widely distributed from southern Scandinavia to the Mediterranean shores. So why does it have a restricted range in Britain? It seems that the smooth snake is at the tip of its range here as the average British summer is only just long enough for the female to gestate her young.

The main risk to smooth snakes are fires, often started deliberately by juvenile delinquents which get out of hand and can destroy hectares of heathland. I can also remember a site in Surrey apparently cleared of smooth snakes, which had been studied for years by Anthony Braithwaite. He knew individual animals and suspected their home range was relatively small. The same snakes turned up under the same refugia year after year. It was thought collectors for the American market took them.

The last time I saw a smooth snake is now four years ago which is the same amount of time I have taken to produce this article when Roger Robinson of WRAG asked me to in 1997. On reflection the smooth snake is not an easy reptile to find but I have been lucky to experience encounters with them and it's about time I visited my 'old' sites in Surrey and Dorset again.

#### RECOMMENDED READING from a historical aspect

Leighton G R (1901) British Serpents. William Blackwood & Son

Smith, M (1951) The British Amphibians & Reptiles. Collins

Appleby L G (1971) British Snakes. John Baker Publishers

Beebee T, Griffiths R (2000) Amphibians and Reptiles ISBN 0-00-220084-8

#### POSTSCRIPT

Would any WART or WRAG members be interested in going to Dorset for a weekend next April/May to see Britain's rarest reptile? If so, please register your interest. I can be contacted e-mail [janclemons@wartsoc.co.uk](mailto:janclemons@wartsoc.co.uk)

Jan Clemons



# **The West Midland Regional Amphibian & Reptile Groups Conference**

(Held at Hopwood Park Motorway Services - Junction 2 on M42 on Saturday 20th October)

31 delegates attended this year's regional conference, which was organised by the Worcestershire group (Mike Sutton and Alan Shepherd in particular), so Jan was saved a job!

Although we arrived at Hopwood in a torrential downpour, the weather allowed a trip around the impressive Sustainable Urban Drainage System closer to lunchtime. Runoff from the car park and the HGV park is cleaned by channelling it through a system of grassy areas, gravel and progressively cleaner ponds, resulting in good habitat for amphibians and other creatures. The runoff from the roof is also collected into a pond. Perhaps planners could be persuaded to include this kind of drainage scheme in their designs in future.

John Baker spoke on "Developments at FrogLife" FrogLife now has several employees who answer phonecalls from the public from their new office. They recently produced the new Great-crested Newt leaflet.

"Ponds and Newts in an Arable Landscape" was Jim Foster's subject. Aerial photographs were used to find out where ponds have been lost, or gained, and sited were visited where the land-owners gave their permission. Ponds often occurred along the lines of hedgerows.

Will Watson demonstrated a pond evaluation system which assigned values to ponds based on species and numbers present. He pointed out that ponds may be of value to other creatures such as invertebrates, which could also be assigned values.

Jan and Nigel Clemons investigated "the use of technology in herpetofauna surveying". Delegates were encouraged to think about what information is necessary for records, as well as what could ideally be included. A Global Positioning System device and a probe which measured available oxygen, as well as pH and temperature, were demonstrated, which give useful information although they may make amphibian recording expensive.

John Cancalosi, a photographer who has travelled the world in pursuit of good animal pictures, gave an impressive slide show, even if it wasn't totally herp-related. Close-ups included some of a Koala bear with its baby.

A discussion on the future of Amphibian and Reptile Groups brought up both encouraging developments and challenging problems. New area groups are being formed, while existing groups sometimes struggle to maintain interest and members. More helpers are usually needed at habitat management tasks.

(Anyone concerned about WART's future is invited to attend the AGM!)

## **WART on the web**

WART's web-site, created by Nigel Clemons, can be found at: [www.wartsoc.co.uk](http://www.wartsoc.co.uk)

# **Book Review: "Amphibians and Reptiles"**

by Trevor Beebee and Richard Griffiths

(ISBN 000 220084 8 Paperback, ISBN 000 220083 X Hardback)..

published in 2000 by Harper Collins

This book on our native herps gives in depth background knowledge on Great Britain and its historical dealings with herps, and then returns back to modern day herpetological surveys etc. The book goes into great depth about each of the British species and includes a section on Chelonia and aliens to the country. A special chapter on conservation is also very helpful. Around 270 pages of really good information combined with 8 colour plates and various black and white photographs go towards making it a good book to give any conservation minded herpetologist. Perhaps a bit on the expensive side at £19.99 but the content is worth it. I recently bought a copy and thought it very good.

Nicola Angell

## **Christmas Tales Or: The Snake with Legs and Other Stories**

It seems that many people are confused about any creature that isn't a mammal or a bird. The facts, that reptiles are scaly-skinned (not slimy) and amphibians only return to water to breed, are unknown to many, as is shown by enquiries from members of the public to WART and other conservation organisations.

I have had neighbours bring back "lost" frogs to my pond (how *did* these poor creatures manage without humans around?!), and have listened to a man describing the "newts" that "run across the stone wall at the bottom of my garden". Another person had a "lizard" that lived under a plant-pot in the shed, that turned out to be a newt. I have encountered a few people who think a large crested newt is a Great Crested Newt, but this is understandable. Some creatures' names are very unhelpful.

A group of research scientists were looking for plants in a ditch in Cambridgeshire when they were informed by the local farmhands that there were lots of adders down there and that they basked on the banks. They were also told that a box of snakes had been left at the side of the road, and a "large blue snake" had appeared nearby. (I think in this case the researchers were justified in being concerned, although the ditch snakes sound like grass snakes!).

Dennis Dey, recorder for the Sussex Amphibian and Reptile Group, wrote an article in their autumn newsletter describing various enquiries he has dealt with in the past year. The vast majority appear to be from people who are convinced that they have seen or caught an adder, which actually turns out to be a grass snake. (If any WARTers have really seen an adder in Warwickshire, we would like to know, as they are rare around here.)

At the Regional Meeting in October, someone described a call they had received from someone who had "a snake in my Buddleia". Further questioning revealed that the snake was

a few inches long and had short stumpy legs. I don't know whether the caller was passed on to a caterpillar expert....

Perhaps we could devise a game for Christmas: given various vague/inaccurate/wrong information, you have to guess the creature. Experts at the game might qualify for special consideration for public relations jobs in conservation.

Illustrations by Nicola Angell.

Contributions for the newsletter should be sent to Helen Newell.

Copy deadline for next issue: 31<sup>st</sup> December 2001.

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