



KRAG *news*

NEWSLETTER OF THE KENT REPTILE AND AMPHIBIAN GROUP

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Common Toad, *Bufo bufo* © Brett Lewis

Common toads are particularly vulnerable during the breeding season when they migrate en masse. Unfortunately the sight of many hundreds of toad fatalities on the counties roads is all too familiar. The Beachborough Conservation Project hopes to address this issue for a population of toads in Folkestone by raising enough funds to install the counties first toad tunnels. KRAG is affiliated to the project and will continue to offer support until the final objective of installing the tunnels is achieved. Visit www.kentarg.org for more information.

A Note From The Editor..

As the season for field surveys draws to a close it is certainly time to take out those winter clothes and consider joining one of KRAGS many winter tasks for some fun and frolics. Throughout the winter months KRAG will be carrying out management tasks at a number of it's key reptile sites here in Kent. The abundance of warm sunshine over the summer followed by lots of rain has meant that many of the sites have become overgrown or even inaccessible. However the importance of keeping these sites suitable for their inhabitants is paramount to our ongoing conservation efforts. If you can spare the odd bit of time over the winter and wish to join in the fun contact one of the KRAG committee who can let you know about events happening in your area or you could visit the KRAG website at www.kentarg.org

As well as management tasks there is also a series of herpetological gatherings over the winter including KRAGs very own SE ARG regional conference, also the British Herpetological Society conference and the the Herpetological Workers meeting, all of which have reduced rates for ARG members. So why not get involved?

KRAG has a great history of leadership by encouraging people to get involved and enjoy close encounters with some of Kent's most illusive species. I hope to see many of you out and about. Keep up the great work and I look forward to another successful season in 2007.

Best wishes



Brett Lewis - Editor

Ps. I'd like to thank all of those that have submitted articles for this newsletter edition. It's great to see that KRAG continues to be so pro-active in the community and taking time to record & share their efforts.

THANK YOU...!



Winston's Adders (and newts)



Chartwell House, earlier the home of Winston Churchill and still surrounded by land that is a wildlife haven

The sites monitored by Krag are nearly always places of some natural beauty but less often places of historical interest. Two exceptions are Down Bank, one of Charles Darwin's old haunts, and Chartwell, the grounds of Winston Churchill's home and now a National Trust Property.

This year, for the first time, Chartwell grounds were included in our Adders in Decline project. This has involved Krag member Nick Johnson and Chartwell Warden Paul Naden laying tin and felt refuges and checking them regularly for

the reptiles that shelter beneath. We also undertook a scoping survey of the grounds including Winston's old swimming pool that has become partially filled in and rather pond-like. To our delight we found that it supports a great crested newt population and is visited by grass snakes.

Nick Johnson is based in Westerham and first drew our attention to the reptile potential of Chartwell. It has proved an excellent site and on one visit in April we observed two male adders performing their combat ritual. There was almost certainly a female close by although we failed to see it. Since then we have also found plenty of slow worms and grass snakes.



Males adders in ritual combat on the Chartwell estate

The Chartwell estate is extensive and includes Weardale and other land around Toys Hill. Next year, we plan to expand our monitoring activities to the land adjacent to Chartwell to improve our understanding of the adders of the greensands ridge. It's heartening to think that the beautiful countryside seen from the terraces of Chartwell, which was why Winston chose to live there, still supports the beautiful creatures of his time.

Rick Hodges

Why Use Refugia..?

In a nutshell because they significantly increase your chances of detecting the presence of reptiles on a site, because if reptiles do find them they use them preferentially under a far wider variety of more marginal weather conditions, throughout the whole of the spring summer and autumn, whereas the traditional method using field craft skills is more likely to be useful only in the early spring and autumn.

The necessary field crafts have to be learned and practised, and take a long time to acquire. Basically they involve knowing exactly what reptiles are likely to be doing at any particular time under any set of weather conditions and then being at the right place at the right time in order to see them, and approaching slowly quietly and carefully.

The refugia technique needs very limited field craft i.e. the need to approach quietly and is therefore usable by anyone. By refugia we are usually referring to pieces of thin metal such as corrugated iron or roofing felt which reptile searchers have traditionally found useful for finding reptiles. We lay them in likely places on a site which we need to survey, usually during the winter and then visit the site regularly about ten times between April and September and simply "look under the refugia".



Students from the University of Kent check refugia at Kings Wood

The theory behind their use is that provided reptiles are present and you have laid refugia in places where the animals are foraging for food, during the course of their foraging, reptiles will notice that the place under the tin is either warmer than the surrounding habitat, or is drier than the surrounding habitat (on wet days). In either case these facts register in the animals brains and they then preferentially often use the refugia for basking or shelter.

To put a handle on how much more effective refugia survey is than using conventional field craft I produce below some results that I have extracted from two very different surveys that I have been involved with: The first was using traditional field craft, investigating the usefulness of a transect study approach for reptiles and was carried out on a prime reptile Surrey site .

Continued...

The work was reported fully in an English Nature Science report No 27. Only the smooth snake of the six native reptile species was absent from this site, which I monitored continuously for one month in April/May 1995 during daylight hours. In 134hrs monitoring spread over 24 days (five others were wash outs due to very inclemental weather), a total of 142 animal encounters, all species, all life stages, were recorded. Some of these were only seen once in the entire survey period. Others were seen almost regularly in fact one animal was observable for approx 25% of the time. The main statistic to reflect upon was the overall detection, animal/hr ratio i.e. 1.07. Hard work! and that for a prime reptile site.



Lizards basking on a roofing felt tile

The second was a refugia survey for SE London chalk grassland/scrub sites in 2004. There were three main sites, and nine separate compartments. 49 refugia were laid, and each was visited 10 times between mid April and the end of September under a variety of reasonable weather conditions at different times of the day. Including walking time and visual search this amounted to just 60hrs total search time. Again reporting all encounters for all species at all life stages, a total of 815 encounters were recorded 628 were for slow worms, all (100%) using the refugia none seen otherwise. 184 were for common lizards, 67% were using the refugia. 3 were grass snakes, all using the refugia.

Its worth commenting that had refugia not been used neither flourishing populations of slow worms or the presence of grass snakes would have been detected though good indications of viable common lizard populations were found using conventional field craft. However the main statistic to reflect on was the overall hit rate of 13.5 animals/hr, staggeringly more efficient and effective than using traditional field craft, and a lot more convenient. I rest my case...!

Bill Whitaker

Adder at Sea



As we tied our tender to 'Lampuka', our Halcyon 23, my wife, Lois, shrieked SNAKE! To our amazement, an adder was hanging on for dear life to the Halcyon's bottom rudder pin. What to do next? If we had cast off, the animal might have died as the nearest land was 100 yards away and there was a three-knot tide running. I'd recently seen a TV programme where a reptile expert handled snakes with the use of a stick, so I passed the boathook to Lois (she catches the spiders in the house) who coaxed it into twining around the boathook from where he was dropped into a bucket. We then tied a plastic bag securely over the bucket, as the thought of an adder loose in the bilges was a bit scary. I don't know if the snake enjoyed the sail or not, but when we dropped it off on the beach later it seemed none the worse for its experience as it slithered off into the marram grass

Ken Kemp, Anglesey in Practical Boat Owner, October 2006

From New Zealand to Snakes in Scord's Wood

When my son announced he was getting married in June in London I was ecstatic - because it gave me just the kind of reason I needed to ask for time off of work to travel from New Zealand - at a time when snakes might be about in Scord's Wood.

I'd read about Adders in Decline on the KRAG web site, was worried about the gaps in the current status maps, and had sent in my grid references for my sightings in the early 1960's. But I just had to come and see for myself.

Wedding festivities completed, we left Ide Hill at 8am one heat wave morning in late June following the footpath for Toys Hill armed with my recollections and those of a local resident that were perhaps a decade or two more recent. By the time we entered Scord's Wood there were good patches of sunshine among the bracken, and almost immediately we disturbed a snake that took us so much by surprise that we did not get a sighting. The speed with which it departed did not seem adder like, but the location was promising. A further 50 metres down the path and there was a sloughed skin, which I duly collected to send to KRAG.

We spent the rest of the morning visiting my old adder haunts and any other likely habitat both in Scord's Wood, Emmetts Gardens and Weardale - with no success at all. The opportunity to wander the area again was in itself rewarding, but also perhaps revealing for the changes that had occurred. For areas that had been open or semi-open in the 1960's were now for the most part in moderate to deep shade, and now not at all what I would think of as adder habitat. Nor was the change really attributable to the 1987 hurricane, since these were areas that were not in tall woodland. Two possible reasons for the change come to mind. One was the spread of *Rhododendron ponticum* as an understory plant, especially under oak on the lighter soils. The other the realisation that what had existed in my youth were probably early seral stages from some even more open habitat, that reflected more intense human utilisation in the past.

With these possibilities in mind, I looked with a different perspective at the work the National Trust is doing there in leaving some areas entirely to natural processes while in other areas introducing a management cycle which that will ensure that there are always some areas recently cleared of virtually all woody vegetation. If there are still adders in the vicinity they may need this management to ensure suitable habitat.

Rick Hodges kindly accepted my sloughed skin, which turned out, not surprisingly, to be grass snake. I hope I can return again to continue my quest in less than another 40 years.

Roger Frost, Murchison, New Zealand

The Bredhurst Woodland Project and Krag

On the North Downs, about 6 miles north of Maidstone, lies the small village of Bredhurst. The area is lucky to be surrounded by chalk grassland and to have about 600 acres of ancient woodland; one of the largest woodlands in the AONB protected landscape. But all this is under threat due to fly-tippers, motorbikes and 4x4s. In response, the Bredhurst Woodland Action Group (BWAG) was formed in May 2005 to promote the conservation of this SNCI designated area, comprising Monkdown Wood (TQ790608) and Bredhurst Hurst.



Bredhurst's Ancient Woodland

The main problem is a byway cutting through the centre of the woodland that allows access to off road vehicles and fly tippers. This has resulted in vast areas being destroyed, with many footpaths and bridleways now almost unusable. Off road groups are entitled to use the byway and many of these behave responsibly but there remains a vast number that stray off the byway in search of more entertaining circuits. This invariably takes them onto private land where they often chop down trees or demolish any fencing that stands in their way. BWAG are working closely with Kent County Council to restrict access to only legitimate vehicles. Local community support is strong. A 1500 signature petition, demanding that action be taken to preserve the site, has been presented to Parliament by local MP, Hugh Robertson and a membership scheme, launched in May 2006, already has 100 members, including many local businesses. BWAG is also working closely with Cllr Paul Carter, Leader of KCC, who is fully supportive of the project, Kent Wildlife Trust, The Mid Kent Downs Project and others to ensure the area is preserved for future generations.

BWAG has been very keen to gather the support of local natural history groups in order to record the fauna and flora on site and so strengthen the case for the protection of this very important area. In May, members were invited over to view the site and Rick Hodges and Kevin Johnson found adders in the margins between meadows and woodland; slow worms and toads are also well known in the area. As a follow up to this Kevin manned a Krag stand at the BWAG open day in June.

Future work includes the implementation of a management plan, compiled by The Kent Wildlife Trust; the renovation of the byway, footpaths and bridleways and the creation of circular routes; improved interpretation, signage and promotion of the area; habitat restoration and the erection of physical barriers to prevent further destruction, including fencing and hedging. In due course it is hoped that Krag will organise further visits to the area to make a more detail inventory of the herpetofauna and based on that to offer some suggestions on reptile friendly management.

For more information contact Vanessa Jones on 07813 785940,
Email - postmaster@vanessajones.plus.com or visit our website www.bwag.org.uk

Vanessa Jones

Forthcoming Events..

Come and join the KRAG team on a wide range of projects, events and presentations. Below is an example of forthcoming events, however these are updated frequently on our website (www.kentarg.org) so please get in touch if you would like a full list of dates and to get involved.

E-mail - Events@kentarg.org

16th December 2006

HCT and BHS Joint Scientific Meeting
"Amphibian and reptile biology, ecology and conservation"

27-28th January 2007

ARG UK Annual Conference
"Herpetofauna Workers' Meeting"

As winter closes in many of the KRAG team will be undertaking management tasks at their regular monitoring sites. If you would like to tag along and lend a hand please get in touch.

Article Submission..

As news letter editor I am always on the look out for interesting articles to add to our newsletter publications. If you have time to jot down some of your activities or new and interesting records, please send them in to newsletter@kentarg.org

Please use this e-mail address to forward any or all of the following for entry into the forthcoming newsletters:

Articles, Reviews, Photographs, Events, Conference news, Education or anything else that may be of a herpetological interest....

You can also post articles for submission to

KRAG Newsletter
C/o KMBRC Tyland Barn,
Chatham Road,
Sandling,
Maidstone,
Kent,
ME14 3BD

For the next newsletter - May 2007, the deadline for submissions is 30th April 2007. Please continue to send in articles that I can stockpile for future use.

Brett Lewis - KRAG Committee and
Newsletter Editor

Renew Your Membership..!

To help reptiles and amphibians in Kent and continue to receive the **KRAG News**, please renew your membership, using the tear-off strip below.

Tear/Cut Here

To join KRAG, simply send this voucher and £5.00 (payable to Kent Reptile and Amphibian Group) to KRAG, C/o KMBRC Tyland Barn, Chatham Road, Sandling, Maidstone, Kent, ME14 3BD.

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