

KRAG *news*

NEWSLETTER OF THE **KENT REPTILE AND AMPHIBIAN GROUP**

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Importance of Roadside Verges

Lizard King of the Compost

The NARRS Project...

NUMBER 21

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Grass snake © Brett Lewis

Like the Adder, the harmless Grass snake is often victim of misguided persecution. A common garden visitor, people often fear that they will have an impact on fish and amphibian populations in ponds. In fact grass snakes will only have a very small impact and are testimony that a wildlife garden has been a great success, after all nature intended that grass snakes should eat amphibians! To find out more about grass snakes including their behaviour, ecology and distribution please visit our website at www.kentarg.org

KRAG'S New Logo...

Introducing KRAG's New Logo

After nearly 20 years of displaying our now familiar common toad and grass snake in front of a Kentish Oast, The Committee thought that it may be time for a new logo for the group.

But before revealing the new logo, a little history...

The first published use of the original logo that I am aware of dates from November 1988. This was Issue 1 of the Kent Reptiles and Amphibians Group newsletter.

The opening gambit was proposed by founder members Dr. G. A. N. Davis and Dr. J. F. D. Frazer. Derek Frazer is former president of the British Herpetological Society (from which he retired in 1981) and was a very active Kent recorder. Dr. Frazer contributed over 600 records to the KRAG database (many of which were collected with his friend Dr. Davis). The vast majority of these records were amphibian and in 1990 the pair published an important work on the distribution of newts in Kent.

Davis, G. A. N. and Frazer, J. F. D. (1990) The distribution of newts in Kent. The Transactions of the Kent Field Club, 11 (2), 61 - 67.

At that time Dr. Davis and Dr. Frazer proposed that the then Kent Trust for Nature Conservation (now simply The Kent Wildlife Trust) needed a group dedicated to conservation of reptiles and amphibians.

Suggested group objectives included the following:

1. Undertake survey work to map the distribution of species.
2. Offer advice on planning applications that may affect species.
3. Offer advice on general conservation measures.
4. Raise awareness of amphibian and reptile conservation with local people.
5. Mount 'rescues' of animals that may be in danger from development activities.

KRAG has evolved somewhat over the years. Although KRAG members no longer become involved in development based rescues (these are best handled by professional ecological consultants) and have only limited available time to offer advice on planning applications (there are simply too many in Kent!), the remainder of those early objectives still remain very relevant in the 21st Century.

KRAG currently promotes reptile and amphibian conservation by:

1. Recording the distribution and monitoring the status of herpetofauna in the county.
2. Providing general advice on reptiles and amphibians and their habitat management to relevant organisations and the general public. Continued...

... 3. Raising awareness amongst the general public.

Since KRAG has evolved over the years and is recognised as being one of the more dynamic and active local groups, The Committee felt that a new image was needed. However, we didn't want to lose too much of our past identity...

The funds that we raised to publicise and host last year's ARG UK SE Regional Meeting allowed us to commission Jennifer Drage to redesign the KRAG Logo. So, out with the old...



...and in with the new...



See, we kept the oast, snake and toad!
The new logo will be finding its way onto our various publications in due course.

Lee Brady
Chairman

Roadside Nature Reserves & Reptiles...

By Fred Booth

To many people roadside verges are just that - the edge of the road!

They are in reality a slice through the natural habitats which exist throughout the county. They reflect the changes from chalk grassland, to Wealden lanes and ditches, to many forms of woodland cover, to coastal clifftops and beaches.

More than 30 years ago it was recognised that many of those verges were important areas for wildlife - mainly their botanical diversity, with some sites supporting rare species. They were often subjected to a ruthless form of management - frequent cutting - often at the peak flowering time for many plants - or were sprayed to eliminate broad leaved plants - resulting in coarse grassland of low interest.

An arrangement was made by Kent Wildlife Trust (or Kent Trust for Nature Conservation as it was then known) with the Highway Authorities to identify a selection of the verges, which then had a management plan to prevent mowing at the wrong time, and no spraying at all. These came to be called Roadside Nature Reserves (RNR's).

Since that time the scheme has been amended to take account of experience, and has been enlarged to the extent that a Road Verge Officer is now engaged by the KWT to monitor and manage the RNR's. Since that appointment there has been a much greater concentration on recording the exact wildlife interest on each of the RNR's. A voluntary Verge Warden is appointed for most sites, and others have been regularly monitored.

This has shown that the earlier assessments, which related only to the botanical interest, were greatly enhanced by the wide diversity of insects, mammals, reptiles and amphibians which are found there. Continued...

...The RNR project now manages 131 sites, extending over more than 55 miles, the longest being the Thanet Way (4.5 miles !!!) and the shortest only 15 metres in the Gravesham area. In addition to the controlled management by the Highway Authorities, with their usual twice yearly cut in spring and autumn, the KWT Verge Officer arranges for a small working party to cut and clear sensitive sites where the other management is inadequate.

So how is this of interest to Krag?

Some of the sites where reptiles interest has been observed include:-

Bluebell Hill, between Chatham and Maidstone. Several sections are RNR but the main interest lies in the slip road leading to Aylesford - here there is a steep chalk embankment with a flat wide verge, much colonised by plants and shrubs. This has been confirmed as regular adder site, with animals being recorded each year for the past five years - a maximum of 4 on any one visit.

Last year numbers recorded were lower - partly because of a lack of recording, but on 7th September an adder was recorded basking on one of the brush piles which are kept at the foot of the chalk bank. These piles of cuttings have been the favourite recording feature, with others basking on open spaces on the wider verge.



Viviparous Lizard © Brett Lewis

Refugia were placed three years ago - a mixture of carpet tiles, incidental debris and wheel discs. These were mainly to try and record the slow worms and lizards, and have proved a success with slow worms recorded every year at several points. Lizards are also often recorded. So, three reptiles species, regularly recorded, one RNR...



Female Adder © Brett Lewis

Adders have also been found on several occasions at A20 Wrotham Hill; the A249 at

Stockbury - at two sites; on Old Park Hill, Dover; and on the B2011 at West Hougham.

Grass snakes are seldom found with only a single record at Crundale

Sow worms, as could be expected, are plentiful - with again Bluebell Hill, the A 249 at Stockbury, Wrotham Hill, Crete Road Folkestone, several locations in the Medway Towns area, and particularly beside the A 228 at Halling. On one recording day there in 2003 some 17 slow worms and 22 lizards were found under various items of debris or sunning in open areas.

Refugia are only located at Bluebell Hill, other records are simply using incidental roadside debris, wheel discs - even a crisp packet is sufficient to make a check worthwhile. The piles of cuttings are a regular feature now. The Wardens are made aware of this special interest for their sites and are now regularly monitoring for reptiles.

The present initiative to create a full register of Sites of Reptile interest is a major step forward, and I hope that some of these RNR's may be included for their consistent interest, particularly for the adders.

Fred Booth
Kent Wildlife Trust

Lizard King of the Compost..!

Making Compost Count for Slow-Worms

Gareth Matthes

If you go down to the garden today you're sure of a big surprise... if you look into your compost today you'll never believe your eyes... for every slow-worm that ever there was, has gathered there on purpose because today's the day the slow-worms have their picnic...

(C. Newton 2006)

The slow-worm is an extraordinarily secretive animal. Although allotment holders may be familiar with the slow-worm, ecologists know surprisingly little about its ecology. Slow-worms spend most of their lives underground or deep under the vegetation. We are most likely to find them in compost heaps, or when they are warming up under bits of old wood, polythene sheeting or corrugated iron. However, the few animals we see are usually just the tip of the iceberg as most slow-worms are below the surface and rarely observed. In suitable locations slow-worms can occur in considerable numbers, with over 1,000 per hectare recorded in parts of Southern England.

As with many other species in Britain, the slow-worm has suffered dramatic declines in recent decades, mainly due to habitat loss and intensive land-use. So the populations remaining in allotments and gardens could be of particular importance to the survival of this species, especially in urban areas. In order to help understand more about slow-worms and their use of compost heaps, Herpetological Conservation Trust (HCT) and Amphibian and Reptile Groups UK (ARG UK) are undertaking a national

Slow-worm Compost Survey, Survey form can be downloaded from -

<http://www.narrs.org.uk/slowwormcompost.htm>.

Creature Features

Despite its snake-like appearance, the slow-worm is in fact a legless lizard. Its body is cylindrical and its colour is usually a shiny, metallic grey or brown. Closer inspection reveals differences in coloration and shape between sexes, individuals and animals of different ages.

Female slow-worms tend to have dark flanks and a thin, dark stripe down the back. They also have relatively smaller heads than males. Males tend to be a uniform grey colour, lacking the longitudinal stripe and often have a scattering of blue spots.



Male Slow-worm © Brett Lewis

Older slow-worms tend to have a duller appearance and are often battle scarred. Slow-worms give birth to 'live' young. Newly hatched slow-worms are like miniature versions of adult females, with dark sides and stripe along the back, contrasting with a striking yellow, gold or copper background.

Adult slow-worms can grow up to 50 cm in total length, whereas the newly-born young are 7 to 10 cm long. In common with other species of lizard, the slow-worm is distinguishable from snakes by the visible eyelids (you may see them blink) and the ability to 'shed' its tail.

Distribution and habitat preferences

The slow-worm occurs throughout most of Europe, including all of Great Britain, although they tend to be most abundant in the southern counties. Slow-worms are the reptile reported most commonly from urban areas, where they often occur in gardens, parks, allotments and derelict or brownfield land. They need long grass and overgrown areas; therefore they tend to favour unkempt areas of gardens and allotments. Of our native reptiles, the slow-worm seems to be the happiest to live in close proximity to humans, provided its habitat is not disturbed too dramatically.

Although it is difficult for ecologists to study the slow-worm, there are fears that the species may still be in a worrying decline, primarily due to the loss of its semi-natural habitats such as rough grassland, woodland/field edges, hedgerows, heathland, scrub and through intensive agricultural practises. Like all our reptiles, the slow-worm is protected from killing and injury, under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.



The Compost King © Chris Gleed Owen

A brood of young is produced in September to October. Each baby is born in a transparent membrane, from which it emerges almost immediately. Slow-worms are long-lived: 20 years or more in the wild, and over 50 years recorded in captivity. In urban areas, many

...older animals tend to have lost their tails, often due to cats.

How Can You Help Conserve Slow-worms

Slow-worms are a welcome component of the compost ecosystem, the king of the food-chain, feeding on pests such as garden slugs, snails and perhaps the New Zealand Flatworm. By joining in with the *Slow-worm Compost Survey* you can help us to understand more about slow-worm ecology and just how important composting is to this secretive animal.

Private Life of the Slow-worm

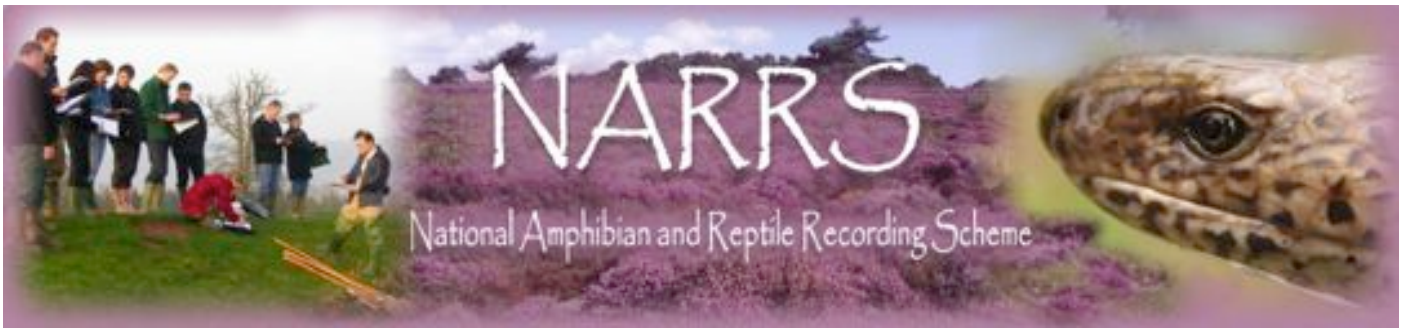


Mating Slow worms © Brett Lewis

Slow-worms hibernate throughout the winter months, sometimes sharing hibernation sites with other animals. In spring, males often fight, presumably to see off potential rivals for mates. Even mating itself can be quite aggressive, with amorous males holding females tightly in their jaws. Despite these conflicts slow-worms are harmless and would not bite a person.

Based on original text from *Growing Heap*, Spring 2006, Issue No.37, pg 12-13, Journal of The Community Composting Network, www.communitycompost.org

Gareth Matthes
Surrey Reptile & Amphibian Group



The National Amphibian and Reptile Recording Scheme (NARRS) is a volunteer survey, targeting the nationally widespread amphibians (great crested newt, smooth newt, palmate newt, common toad and common frog) and reptiles (viviparous lizard, slow-worm, grass snake and adder). The purpose of the survey is to provide robust assessments of the conservation status of each species. To do this, NARRS need to survey a representative sample of sites across the UK in a systematic and repeatable way. By repeating the survey over time, NARRS aim to monitor trends in the status of our widespread herpetofauna

The survey visits will record each species, and gather information on habitat quality. The number of sites surveyed will need to be large enough to provide reliable conclusions and allow extrapolation for the whole country. Several 1 km survey squares have been selected in Kent.



NARRS will provide training and licensing as necessary, and allocate survey squares for volunteers to survey. Results will be submitted either directly to Krag or online via the NARRS website (<http://www.narrs.org.uk>).

The survey involves:

- Registration with NARRS (either directly or through Krag)
- Arranging permission with a landowner(s) to survey a pond or area of land.
- For ponds, one to three repeat visits over the course of the spring.
- For reptiles, three visits starting in the spring, but can continue through the summer.
- Return of data collection, preferably online.

NARRS aim to provide free one-day training courses for surveyors in all parts of the UK and no prior experience is necessary. All volunteers will be trained in amphibian identification, habitat assessment, survey methods and practicalities, to equip them with the knowledge and information they need to take part. NARRS have a page listing the training courses, to help you find one near you.

Each surveyor will be allocated a 1 km square (or several 1 km squares, if so desired). Surveyors will arrange permission with the landowner to carry out the survey, but NARRS will provide some simple pointers to make this easier. NARRS will arrange any licensing that is required (subject to satisfactory completion of training). NARRS will be cooperating closely with Krag to maintain support and contact between surveyors, particularly those with little experience.

Training courses will be held throughout the spring, in as many parts of the country as possible.

If you would like to get involved please sign up on the NARRS website or contact Krag.

Lee Brady

Forthcoming Events..

Come and join the KRAG team on a wide range of projects, events and presentations. Below are some 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

23rd-24th June 2007

KENT GOES WILD..!
Reculver Country Park, Nr. Herne Bay
www.kent.gov.uk/kentgoeswild

30th June 2007

Herptiles & Mammals
A Walk from Bridge to Littlebourne
Call Jon Bramley on 01227 750092

29th July 2007

Herptiles & Mammals
With the Kent Mammal Group
At Quilters Wood (£5 p.p)
Call Brett Lewis on 01227 366278

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 - October 2007, the deadline for submissions is 30th September 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.

Name

Address

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Phone Email