

KRAG *news*

NEWSLETTER OF THE KENT REPTILE AND AMPHIBIAN GROUP

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Sand Lizard © Brett Lewis

Recently reintroduced into the county by the Herpetological Conservation Trust (HCT), the last reliable record of an indigenous Kent Sand Lizard dates back to 1969. Sand lizards are nationally scarce due to their specific habitat requirements of open sand for egg laying and mature vegetation structure for cover. To find out more about Sand lizards including their behaviour, ecology and distribution please visit our website at - www.kentarg.org

Kent Sand Lizard Status Report

A Successful Reintroduction..?

By Bill Whitaker



In September 2004 the Kent Wildlife Trust and the Herpetological Conservation Trust (HCT) reintroduced sand lizards to an East Kent site.

Now four years after the first animals were released, it is still too early to say that a successful reintroduction has been achieved.

All we can say from last year's survey results is that some animals have survived in, for them, a new place. Judging solely from the size of the animals seen, these survivors were from the first two autumn releases in 2004 and 2005. What we can say with certainty is that the habitat has sufficient food and hibernation places for these animals to survive, but what we want to know is whether some healthy animals have attempted to breed. I visited twice last autumn hoping to find evidence, but did not find any.

The HCT reintroduction protocol.

The HCT uses hatchling sand lizards bred from captive wild animals in outdoor vivaria, for releasing at reintroduction sites around the UK in the autumn of each year. The places where the female sand lizards lay their eggs in the vivaria are noted. They are then carefully dug up and incubated in a safe controlled environment.

After hatching the hatchlings are fed regularly with crickets, so that when they are released, at about 6 weeks old they are a bit larger than they would be if they had been born "in the wild"

There are more of them too; because in the wild various natural disasters can occur so that complete clutches are sometimes "lost".

We release cohorts of ca 30 to 50 hatchlings in the autumn of three consecutive years, ca 120 animals in all.

We then monitor what happens. In Kent the year 2007 was the first complete year after finishing the release programme.

In my opinion, there is no reason at this stage to be pessimistic, rather there are good grounds for optimism. We know that the site supports a population of common lizards, one of the reasons for choosing the site. I know from experience on other sites that seeing what might be judged instant success rarely occurs. The procedure described above has been used several times during the last twelve years or so and there have been no failures to date. Having said that, how do we actually assess success or failure?

I have been closely involved in the sand lizard recovery programme monitoring sites all over the UK during the last 12 years, and before that the early reintroductions carried out by the BHS.

I know of one outstanding success where animals are now breeding successfully over a two km stretch of sand dune frontal system; this from a single point release as detailed above. The original release there was in 1995. Most of the other sites have not been so spectacular; animals have spread out and bred successfully in pockets up to two or three hundred metres away but as with all reptile colonies suitable habitat and connectivity are both always required.

What I would say is that you cannot use the same criteria for every site. Each site is unique, Survival of a colony over a long period of time itself means success. An average life expectancy in the wild of say five to seven years (guess) . The original introductions carried out as early as 1970 by the British Herpetological Society have now been running for 38 years.

I think of one such that I monitor and can say that I have never seen a juvenile animal. I have cumulatively spent over a month, surveying this site over the last 14 years at approx. 4 yr intervals and occasionally I have only ever seen adult and sub adult animals. Yet this introduction must be considered successful by any reasonable criteria. Another important point is that over such a long period of time habitat features change enormously, and the animals always use the best habitat that meets their needs that they can find and this changes over the years. A lesson here for surveyors:

“When surveying, always keep an open mind, don’t assume the animals will be exactly where they were put”.

Just for your interest the animal species plot below shows how the HCT now records reintroduction progress. Animal positions and details such as approx. age and sex are logged in the field using GPS instruments and are then downloaded direct into the computer, before entering on to the aerial photos. Large sand dune systems are very much featureless deserts, and any other method is fraught with potential opportunities for misreading and interpretation.



So in summary what are we looking and hoping for at our Kent site? Initially, evidence of breeding, then dispersal and colonisation of adjacent habitat, and then survival for at least 12 years. Then we can really start to feel confident that it is going to be successful.

Bill Whitaker
KRAG Committee Member

'The Golden Newt'

The Kent and Medway Biological Records Centre (KMBRC) receives numerous phone calls every day from people looking for an identification of a species, usually one they've seen in their garden or local area. Many of them turn out to be valuable records but this particular record was also incredibly interesting. We received an email from a person who had some newts in her pond, one of which was golden in colour and looked unlike any of the others.



After consulting Krag about this we discovered the newt was actually displaying neoteny. This is a term which describes a process called paedomorphosis, whereby a creature retains many of its juvenile characteristics, caused by the creature's physiological development being slowed down. Essentially this means the newt; probably a smooth newt (*Triturus vulgaris*), is an adult, but has retained its juvenile traits, such as the red gills and pale colouration.



The English word 'neoteny' is borrowed from the German 'neotenie', which itself is constructed from the Greek words meaning 'young' and 'to extend'. Natural paedomorphosis occurs in amphibians, particularly salamanders. It is thought the cause in this particular case was that the newt was living in a fairly steep-sided pond, and was unable to get out to hibernate. This may have caused it to retain these juvenile, amphibious characteristics. Neoteny

is only occasionally seen in *Triturus* species – usually, *T. alpestris* and *T. vulgaris*.

This really highlights the work the Records Centre does to get new records and encourage recording in the community, but also how invaluable local groups' expertise is in helping identifications and providing advice and information to people either directly or through us. We have found that working closely with Krag (and other recording groups) is also a good way for the staff at the KMBRC to learn a lot more about Kent's reptiles and amphibians.

Ruth Childs
Krag Member
(Formerly KMBRC)

Insurance Cover for Krag Members.

Krag is now covered by the ARG-UK insurance scheme for all of its activities. This does not need to concern members of the group too much though it does mean that there are one or two changes in the way that we work. The insurance cover provides £5 million of public liability cover on Krag events. There is an additional £25,000 of cover for personal accidents and up to £5 million of member to member liability cover. However, in order to qualify for this additional cover you must fill in a Volunteer Working Agreement. This form is included with this newsletter and if you wish to benefit from this cover it needs to be filled in and sent to Krag's secretary, Rick Hodges, c/o K&MBRC, Tyland Barn, Sandling, Maidstone, Kent, ME14 3BD.

The other thing that members need to do is to ensure that they produce a risk assessment for any activities that they undertake for Krag. This includes survey work and not just the practical tasks that we undertake. In order to help us do this, ARG-UK have produced a generic risk assessment and a lone working procedure that are also included with this newsletter.

These are small steps that we need to take to ensure not only that we are adequately covered by the insurance policy but also that we keep ourselves and our colleagues safe when in the field. If you have any questions about the insurance policy and how it relates to your activities please feel free to contact me at treasurer@kentarg.org or you can find out more information on the ARG-UK website (www.arg-uk.org.uk).

KRAG in the Caribbean

Herps on the 'Hog Island'

Take a deep breath and close your eyes. Think of the lapping waves of the tropical warm waters and coral shores of a remote island in the Caribbean. A Field work opportunity not to be missed. Whilst working and studying for the Durrell Institute of Conservation & Ecology at the University of Kent, I met and became friends with a fellow herpetologist Steve Green. Steve is a PhD student from the Institute and is currently undertaking field work on the remote Cayos Cochinos Islands off the shores of Honduras, C. America.

Steve's study concentrates on the Ecology, Conservation and Commercial exploitation of the Hog Island Boa's that inhabit these remote islands.



The Cayos Cochinos Boa (*Boa constrictor imperator*) exists solely on two small islands in the Cayos Cochinos, approximately 17km north of the Honduran coast. These two populations of insular *Boa constrictor* differ from mainland populations in that they are smaller in size, have a lighter, pinker colouration and are typically more docile in nature. Known in the pet trade as "Hog Island Boas" these two populations were subjected to a period of intense collection during the 1980's to satisfy European and US markets.



By the early 1990's it was reported within the trade community that Hog Island boas had gone extinct in the wild. In 1993 the area was declared a Biological Reserve and measures were taken to prevent further removal of boas from the area, however, no active population management was implemented. In 2004 the Honduran Coral Reef Fund (HCRF) requested that the current population and conservation status of the Cayos Cochinos *Boa constrictor* be investigated.

I was joined on the field trip by Dr Richard Griffiths, a staff member at DICE and Steve's PhD supervisor. The trip began with an arduous journey through the American immigration service that is the Miami International Airport. The way the security operates in America at the moment does not bode well for the general tourist or even those in transit like us. After some considerable time we were able to make our onward leg to San Pedro Sula where we were due to stay for the night. From San Pedro Sula we then took the local bus service to La Ceiba where we met Steve, again for an overnight stop, and then onto Cayos Cochinos the following morning.

After a couple of days travelling we finally reached the Island and it was just as good as I imagined. The island is uninhabited for much of the time with only a skeleton staff looking after the researchers and preparing for visitors from Operation Wallacea. Once off the boat we encountered our first reptiles, Spinytail Iguana. They were basking and running around on the hot sand that is the beach there on the island. Our cabin awaited us and proved to be quite comfortable despite the searing heat. We were quick to unpack and put on our swimming shorts for a swim in the turquoise sea.....





As the week progressed we encountered more and more species including 'Shake-paw' (*Cnemidophorus lemniscatus*), Ghost Anole (*Norops lemurinus*), Green Iguana (*Iguana iguana*), Green Anole (*Anolis allisoni*), Chumpatia (*Phyllodactylus palmeus*) a type of Gecko and more.

Following our refreshing swim we had lunch and then planned the field work according to what Steve required for his study. The afternoon was spent out in the Island's forest looking for Boas and catching them for later collection of biometric measurements and tagging. The forest was very dense and the humidity was a staggering 80%. The island was hump-shaped which meant every route was uphill and it was soon apparent that I am truly acclimatised to life in the temperate regions of this world..!



We even managed to encounter the only amphibian species to be found on the island, the Common tree frog (*Smilisca baudinii*).



It wasn't long before we found our first snake, Steve had taken us to a spot where he had regularly recorded Boas and straight away he found a large female stretched out on a branch. He approached quietly and we examined what appeared to be an abscess growing on the side of her head, probably from an encounter with one of the Spinytail Iguana's, a source of food for these snakes. Steve expertly handled her and she was later identified and processed.

Following in pursuit we found a total of five boas and even managed to find a 'Brown Racer' (*Dryadophis melanolomus*), a fast moving snake that can prove difficult to catch. It raced in to a clump of branches but I was in hot pursuit..! What a fine looking snake it was. Not dissimilar to our native grass snake but much slimmer and perhaps longer at times. We bagged a couple of photographs before releasing it back to its safe haven.



We spent a total of eight days travelling with only four of those actually on the Island. However, in that short space of time we encountered some remarkable species. We made the most of every available opportunity to seek out the endemic inhabitants and even those that were otherwise quite common. We even managed to get a night-hike in through the forest to look for the night dwellers such as the tarantulas, scorpions and different cockroaches. We had some great fun and despite the ever present sand flies we thoroughly enjoyed the trip and I would like to thank Steve for the great opportunity and for showing us around his study site. I will be sure to ask Steve to provide us with an abstract for a future issue of the KRAGs newsletter, watch this space...

Brett Lewis
KRAG Committee Member

KRAGs Website Update...!

www.kentarg.org



KRAG continues to go from strength to strength with a remodelled version of its newsletter and over the past 6 months the design and development of the new KRAG website. Designed by talented, former DICE student, Jen Drage of Aye Aye Design (www.ayeayedesign.co.uk) the new website is host to all of the up-to-date workings of KRAG as a membership organisation.

The website is now much easier to use and has clear links throughout its home page, whether you are looking to submit records, check out the latest news via the blog or look for particular species information, the website has it all to offer. The site is maintained and updated by our Treasurer, Mike Phillips who has been doing a great job of tidying up loose ends following the first development and making sure that the links stay live.

KRAG is always looking for contributions to the website and if you have a story to tell or a record to submit then the Committee would like to hear from you. Another important aspect of communication is via photographs and this has proven to be very useful when members of the public are looking to identify the herps in their gardens or whilst out walking. We therefore ask that if you have any photographs that clearly depict some of our native herpetofauna and wouldn't mind sharing them, we would love to display them in our gallery. You will of course receive full credit for doing so.

Also, KRAG has now gone digital where payment for membership is concerned and you can now pay for your yearly subscription online by simply following the 'membership' link on the homepage and pay just £5.00 via the very secure 'Paypal' payment system. Alternatively, if you would prefer, you can set up a direct debit and the subscription will be deducted from your account on a yearly basis, just contact our Treasurer via the website and he will forward you the necessary details.

Coming soon will be back issues and current issues of the KRAG newsletter..! Hopefully, this will enable members to retrieve past articles of interest or download copies to send to their friends and relatives. The newsletters have been a useful and tangible tool for prospective members and provide an insight into the workings of KRAG and current projects being undertaken by its members both at home and abroad.

The webpage serves as an international doorway to your local herpetofauna group and opens up the community both nationally and internationally. We have even had requests for identification of species found in Kent County, Texas..!

So, please take the time to visit the site and send in your requests and ideas for inclusion on the site as well as your news articles. We look forward to hearing from you...

www.kentarg.org

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

06th July 2008

Riverside Countryside Experience
Riverside Country Park, Gillingham
www.medway.gov.uk

27th & 28th September 2008

Kent Goes Wild
Shorne Wood Country Park
www.kmbrc.org.uk

07th November 2008

Evening Talk by Trevor Beebee
Tyland Barn - Maidstone
[Booking in Advance](#)
E-mail - KRAGevents@btopenworld.com

'Kent Goes Wild'

27 & 28 September 2008

You can take part in the biggest wildlife recording event in the south east at Shorne Wood Country Park.

This free event is open from 10:30am to 4:00pm on both days.

At Kent Goes Wild, you can have fun gathering seeds or pond dipping, learn about how wildlife is recorded and explore Shorne Wood, an extensive 288-acre ancient woodland and heathland country park.

You can also help protect your local wildlife by recording what you see in your back garden or near home. Every record sent to the Kent and Medway Biological Records Centre or one of Kent's recording and wildlife conservation groups will increase our knowledge of the flora and fauna in Kent.

For more information Tel. 01622 685780
or email info@kmbrc.org.uk.



Become A Member Here or Online..!

To help reptiles and amphibians in Kent and receive your copy of **KRAG News** or renew your membership (Subscriptions due in November), use 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