

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 web site (www.kentarg.org) so please get in touch if you would like a full list of dates and to get involved.

E-mail - KRAGEvents@btopenworld.com

8th & 9th May 2009

(Please note date change)

Pond Surveys in Dover & Folkestone
South East Kent

9th May 2009

Field Visit to Cowden Pastures - 10.00am

6th June 2009

Poulton Wood Open Day - 11am - 4.30pm

Article Submissions...

As Newsletter 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 2009, the deadline for submissions is 30th September 2009. Please continue to send in articles that I can stockpile for future use.

Pauline Beach - KRAG Newsletter Editor

KRAG news

NEWSLETTER OF THE KENT REPTILE AND AMPHIBIAN GROUP

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NUMBER 25

SPRING 2009

Renew Your Membership..!

To help reptiles and amphibians in Kent and continue to receive the **KRAG News**, please remember to 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

.....

.....



THE COMMON TOAD

More commonly seen in larger ponds than those found in gardens, the common toad will often coexist alongside fish; the tadpoles being so distasteful that fish soon learn to leave them alone!

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 county's roads is all too familiar.

Toad spawn is easily distinguished from frog spawn as it is laid in strings, not clumps.

See article by Mike Phillips on Page 2 - Getting Toads Out of A Hole.

GETTING TOADS OUT OF A HOLE

This spring has seen the launch of Krag's new recording project, "Getting Toads Out of a Hole" which focuses on the most under-recorded of all Kent's amphibians. Although the common toad is now a priority Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) species, Krag have relatively few records of these remarkable animals in Kent. We suspect that common toads are relatively widespread in Kent but are worried that they may be under threat from habitat loss, deaths on roads and climate change so we are asking everybody to let us know where toads have been seen. Whilst the project concentrates on toads, it has already yielded many records of other amphibian species. Knowing about other species also helps Krag to understand more about which amphibian species live in the same kind of pond and can help us to identify Key Amphibian Sites in Kent.



Photo by Mike Phillips

Project Aims?

All of the information that is collected by this project will be added to Krag's database of herpetofauna. This not only allows us to analyse the information that you send but also means that we can share the data with other partner organisations such as Conservation Organisations, Academic Institutions and Planning Authorities. Krag's objectives for the project include:

- ◇ Identify more toad breeding sites
- ◇ Gain a better understanding of toad distribution in the County
- ◇ Identify the most important toad sites
- ◇ Develop a habitat suitability model for toads

Project Partners and Progress So Far

The project was launched in February with a series of 3 day courses for volunteer surveyors. 50 volunteers were trained in amphibian ecology and survey techniques in Sevenoaks, Ashford and Maidstone and were asked to send Krag records of animals that they see over the course of the season. A great debt of thanks is owed to Kent Wildlife Trust and Vinters Valley Nature Reserve for hosting the events in Sevenoaks and Maidstone. Linking up with Partner Organisations has been a real boost for the project and the level of enthusiasm shown by these volunteers was an inspiration to us all.



Photo by Mike Phillips

As well as training courses, Radio Kent has promoted the project by setting up a web page (www.bbc.co.uk/kent/content/articles/2009/03/02/action_desk_toads_feature.shtml) dedicated to the project and has played an interview with a Krag member asking for results numerous times. A press release was also issued that was published in the Maidstone area leading to a number of results being submitted by members of the public.

Despite the early stage of the season, Krag received 150 new records by the end of March with most of the results not submitted (or even seen) yet. One of the Sevenoaks volunteers has set up a recording project at the school she works in and children are monitoring ponds on and near the school grounds on a regular basis recording the development of frogs and toads. We have been delighted by the response to this project and look forward to continued success in the future.



Photo by Mike Phillips

How Can I Get Involved?

- ⇒ Have you seen any toads or other amphibians in your garden pond or out on a walk? If so we'd love to hear from you. There is a quick and easy record submission form on the Krag web site (www.kentarg.org). It does not matter if you are not entirely sure when you saw the animal or even exactly what species it was. The more information we can collect the better.
- ⇒ Become one of Krag's "Getting Toads Out of a Hole" Surveyors. Krag regularly run training courses for our volunteer recorders. For more details contact Mike Phillips (treasurer@kentarg.org).

Mike Phillips

IT'S A MYSTERY!!!

I had an e-mail sent to me with the attached photographs.



Photo 1 - Frog spawn on decking

Has anyone come across this before or have any ideas as to why the frog spawn is on the decking and not in the nearby pond?



Photo 2 - Pond & decking

HERPETOLOGICAL WORKERS MEETING

- A Note from New Eyes -

The sand dunes in view just over the road with the beach just out of sight, the strong sea wind bellowing as people potter about on this slightly dull morning with contained excitement for the soon to commence conference. Welcome to Blackpool for 2009's Herpetological Workers Meeting.

As most of you will know ARG UK holds conferences at various destinations around the country for the benefit of yourselves, the ARG members. These conferences are an opportunity for members old and new to hear some fascinating talks, the opportunity to chat with the guest speakers, and of course the chance to meet and socialise with other members of the ARG UK network.

The most recent of these conferences, open to all members, that took place was the Herpetological Workers Meeting. Held in Blackpool, this meeting was a weekend of lectures, workshops, networking, and much chatter and fun around the bar during the evenings. This conference weekend brought together people from all different walks of life and from all parts of the country, people not only from the UK ARG's but also councils, Natural England and other influential organisations to give an amalgamation of enthusiastic people brought together in one place, whom all have one important factor in common; their love, passion and dedication to the study, understanding and conservation of British reptiles and amphibians.

The lectures presented on the first day of the conference were aimed to cover a wide variety of areas of interest for all, with talks ranging from occupancy modelling, the million ponds project, thermal ecology of the slow worm, chytrid and ranavirus. The invited speakers delivered well presented, informative and entertaining talks on an area of interest and conservation relevance. Following each talk the speaker was generally questioned by two/three members of the conference audience on various aspects of the content presented within their talk to be described and explained in more detail.



(Display room with information from various Herps organisations)

Many areas of information were able to be covered by providing all attendees with a folder of information upon arrival as well as the offering of free information leaflets from organisations that set up displays of their current project which they have underway and providing any other desired information.

Developing your skills, learning new information and making contacts are not the only part to attending these conferences,

you can also make friends and have fun. I myself have been to a handful of conferences, over the past few months, of varying types for the ARG's and herpetile conservation. I arrived at the herpetological workers meeting with an open mind and not a huge amount of information to contribute to conversations or debates. Still with my own opinions and my passion, I found this to be a great learning curve on what is developing in herpetile conservation in the UK. Also this presented ways to get more practically involved with herpetile conservation, inspiration and ideas for my own career, along with ways that I can get involved with the development and continuation of our ARG.



(Group work within a Reptile Mitigation Workshop)

New blood, as it were, within an ARG and its meetings are always much needed and appreciated. Regardless of your knowledge, you can help and become an active member. Attending meetings can help you in return to develop your knowledge and practical skills. So, if you have an interest in the protection of our reptile and amphibians species, would like to learn more and meet more like minded people, please become an active member of Krag by attending more meetings and events days, they are also fun!

Faye Thompson

KRAG DIG DEEP FOR POND CONSERVATION

Krag have made a donation of £500 to Pond Conservation's Million Ponds Project Digging Fund. The Millions Ponds Project is co-ordinated by Pond Conservation and aims to reverse the tragic pond loss that has occurred over the last 100 years or so. The importance of ponds as a key habitat for many species, not just amphibians, has been recognised recently with ponds being added to the UK Biodiversity Action Plan's list of priority habitats. As the lead body for this habitat, Pond Conservation have applied for funding through the Biffaward scheme to fund pond creation schemes throughout England and Wales.

By donating £500, Krag will enable the Million Ponds Project to claim another £4,500 from Biffaward to fund badly needed ponds. So a relatively small donation from Krag will help make big changes at a landscape level. We are now busy identifying sites for ponds that will help safeguard amphibian metapopulations in Kent and propose these for funding from the project.

IMPORTANT WILDLIFE SITE DAMAGED BY OVERGRAZING

NATURAL
ENGLAND

A farmer has been fined £1,200 and ordered to pay £4,663 costs after Natural England found that a nationally important wildlife site in West Cumbria had been severely damaged by overgrazing.

Crople How Mire - a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) near Eskdale Green in West Cumbria - is nationally protected for its rare basin mire and wet fen plant communities including plants such as bog myrtle, white beak sedge and cranberry. These habitats are nationally rare and few examples remain in this area of England.

Tim Hill, Natural England's Director responsible for SSSIs, said: "Overgrazing and stock feeding has caused significant long term damage to this nationally important site. Inappropriate land management such as this can cause irreversible loss of species and damage to habitats for which SSSIs are designated.

"We are always disappointed by having to bring prosecutions as it means that some of England's most important wildlife has already been lost or damaged. We will continue to work in partnership with owners and occupiers across the country to ensure damage of this kind is limited."

Mr Matterson of Murrayfield Terrace, Ravenglass pleaded guilty at the Magistrates' Court, Barrow in Furness, to two offences relating to increasing the grazing regime and introducing stock feeding without Natural England's consent.

Mr Matterson was also part of Defra's Environmental Sensitive Area (ESA) Scheme, an Agri-Environment Scheme, which was set up to offer incentives encouraging farmers to adopt agricultural practices safeguarding and enhancing parts of the country of particularly high conservation value.

Mr Matterson signed up to the ESA Scheme in 2004 and received payments for sensitive grazing of the SSSI with low stock numbers and no supplementary feeding. Mr Matterson ignored his obligations under the Scheme and intensively grazed the SSSI with more than 300 sheep. The ESA agreement has now been terminated and payments recovered.

Magistrates also made an order that weed control necessary for the restoration of the site be carried out at Mr Matterson's expense.

Land Managers who operate on SSSIs must seek Natural England's consent for operations that are likely to cause damage.

For more information contact Natural England's National Press Office on 0845 603 9953 or send an e-mail to press@naturalengland.org.uk

NEW TRAILS - ISLANDS WEEKLY.COM - MARCH 2009

Over the past two months, hundreds of rough-skinned newts (*Taricha granulosa*) tried to cross San Juan County roads on the way from summer breeding ponds to forested winter foraging areas. Far too many were squashed by careless motorists, leaving telltale ribbons of newt-shaped stains on the asphalt.

Only female newts appear to migrate in the islands. The males remain behind in home lakes and ponds and await the females return in spring when water levels begin to drop. Female newts signal their return with pheromones, "natural perfume," that arouse males sexually. Females prefer to mate with larger males, and then lay their eggs one at a time over several days, and often mate again. Breeding can occur from late April to July. "These orange-bellied newts are one of the islands," two most abundant amphibians (the other is the tiny Pacific chorus or tree frog, *Pseudacris regilla*). They are also one of the Island's most amazing animals. If you approach a newt, it may rear up and display its orange belly, warning of toxicity. Or it may play dead, absolutely stiff. When it believes the coast is clear, it will make a sudden dash for safety!



Rough-skinned newts exude a very powerful neurotoxin, tetrodotoxin, from their skin and are best handled with gloves. Female newts also confer this toxin on their eggs. But one predator has evolved the ability to tolerate significant amounts of tetrodotoxin, the common garter snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*), also abundant in the San Juan Islands. In fact, eating newts confers protective toxicity on the snake! There is also evidence that the snakes, "taste" each newt they catch and reject exceptionally toxic ones.

Genetic evidence indicates that rough-skinned newts spread north into the Salish Sea from northern California and Oregon after the retreat of the last continental glaciers, less than 10,000 years ago. They probably made their way to the San Juan Islands even more recently, and it is quite possible that the Island newts are genetically distinct from mainland newts, and better adapted to the relatively dry, rain shadow, climate.

Newts tend to dominate ponds and lakes once they get established. They are not territorial and can live comfortably at very high population densities. Yet they disappear completely if competing fish or amphibians are introduced to their breeding ponds. The greatest threats to San Juan County newts are non-native warm water fish such as carp and bass, introduced over the years by the State and private landowners as game fish, and more recently introduced bullfrogs from the East Coast. Introducing these exotic species is a death sentence for rough-skinned newts, and newts are being seen in fewer and fewer ponds and lakes.

So please drive carefully! And if you have newts on your property, enjoy their aquatic antics without disturbing them or introducing non-native predators.

Visit Kwiáht's new website at www.kwiaht.org.

WILDLIFE CRIME

GOVERNMENT SETS OUT WILDLIFE CRIME PRIORITIES

DEPARTMENT FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS
News Release (40/09) issued by COI News Distribution Service.
25 February 2009

Birds of prey and a near-extinct shellfish are among the animals earmarked as top priorities in a strengthened fight against wildlife crime in the coming year.



The freshwater pearl mussel, once widespread throughout Europe, is now extremely rare and outside of Britain and Ireland is found in less than 50 rivers worldwide, while birds of prey such as hen harriers are under threat from nest destruction and deliberate killing.

Wildlife Minister Huw Irranca-Davies set out the government's wildlife crime priorities for 2009-2010, including poaching, crimes against bats and the illegal trade in endangered species, and urged people to help combat the criminals.

Police and customs officers will work with the National Wildlife Crime Unit, conservationists, countryside groups, wildlife traders and owners to focus on the new priorities, which are based on the numbers of crimes or the effect crime is having on the future of a species.

Action will include stronger, co-ordinated responses to wildlife crime, specialist training for enforcement officers, raising awareness of wildlife crime and encouraging people to report crimes, and intelligence to identify, detect and prosecute the criminals involved.

Huw Irranca-Davies said: "People and communities can help us in the fight against wildlife crime. Nobody can afford to sit on the fence and let these crimes go unpunished.

"Wildlife crime matters, it has an impact on our environment and on the ecosystems, habitats and wildlife that support our very existence. Information and intelligence are going to be key in this fight; we need to tackle these crimes through effective partnerships."

Detective Inspector Brian Stuart, Head of the UK National Wildlife Crime Unit, said: "The UK police and customs officers are committed to tackling wildlife crime, and these priorities will ensure they have the right training and intelligence to help prevent and prosecute these serious crimes.

"Only through the co-operation of everyone interested in preventing wildlife crime have we been able to identify the best ways to tackle these crimes that affect our shores."

Speaking at the annual Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime (PAW) conference in London, Mr Irranca-Davies also announced that Britain is taking over the chairmanship of the Coalition Against Wildlife Trafficking (CAWT) this summer, building on its establishment by the USA.

The Minister also presented the Conventions and Policy Section at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew with the PAW partner of the year award for their work on tackling wildlife crime.

To find out how to report wildlife crimes, visit the following web site:

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/paw/report/default.htm>

YORKSHIRE COMPANY RECEIVES RECORD FINE FOR WILDLIFE CRIME

NATURAL
ENGLAND

Natural England welcomed the conclusion to a long running legal battle over crimes against protected wildlife. Yorkshire developer Essential Vivendi Ltd have been fined £11,500 and ordered to pay £50 costs for intentionally and recklessly destroying and damaging the shelter of wild animals. This is the largest single fine for offences involving great crested newts.

The development company pleaded guilty of the offence against great crested newts at Scarborough Magistrates Court on 13th March 2009.

The court heard that habitat next to newt breeding ponds at The Bay development in Filey was damaged when the companies ordered vegetation clearance, landscaping and construction work.

Following similar breaches of legislation at the same development in 2002, Natural England, Scarborough Borough Council and North Yorkshire Police had worked together to persuade the developers to take newts into account when carrying out their works. Unfortunately it appears this advice was not heeded.

Peter Nottage, Natural England's Regional Director for Yorkshire and the Humber said "We are always disappointed and saddened when cases end up in court as it means wildlife habitat has already been lost or damaged.

We have repeatedly advised the developers how they could proceed with their plans whilst taking newts into account. We are frustrated that the habitat destruction was just so unnecessary and has wasted a lot of time and resources. Hopefully this ruling will remind others in the construction industry to take protected species into account at an early stage.

We will continue to work in partnership with owners and occupiers across the country to ensure damage of this kind is limited."

Mr Nottage continued "Thousands of great crested newt populations have been lost in the last century, many to developments built where newts were not considered. The law now protects declining species like the great crested newt, and many developers easily comply by getting early specialist advice, and by talking to us."

For further information please contact Emma MacDonald in Natural England's Yorkshire and Humber press office on 0113 2303533, 07900 608073.

emma.macdonald@naturalengland.org.uk

There were three offences in the case.

There is a fine of up to £5,000 and/or up to 6 months imprisonment per offence. Previous convictions relating to great crested newts in other parts of the country have involved fines of £250 to £8400.

Where protected species are present on development sites, or there are reasonable grounds to suspect they may be there, then specialist surveys are required.

UTILITY COMPANY FINED FOR DAMAGING GREAT CRESTED NEWT HABITAT

On 6 March 2009 at Chelmsford Magistrates Court, EDF Energy Networks (EPN) PLC, were fined £1,000 with £90 costs after pleading guilty to damaging or destroying a resting place of great crested newts at an electricity infrastructure site in Stansted Mountfitchet, Essex.

The company had carried out an extension to their site following the construction of a new housing estate nearby without an ecological assessment. In 2006 a housing developer



was convicted of a similar offence when they carried out works outside of the conditions of a licence issued to them by Natural England in respect of great crested newts.

Following the verdict, Natural England Wildlife Management Adviser for Essex, Paul Cantwell said: "This case highlights the importance of companies, including utility companies, of carrying out ecological assessments before undertaking works on sites where there may be protected species. It is not just large scale developments or projects that can have detrimental impacts on protected species, smaller scale work such as this can also be damaging."

PC Andrew Long, the Wildlife Crime Co-ordinator for Essex Police said: "This case demonstrates that Essex Police, working with agencies such as Natural England can have a positive impact on wildlife crime. Essex Police will, where possible, investigate matters of wildlife crime, and if there is sufficient evidence refer the matter to the Crown Prosecution Service."

The offence prosecuted was the damage or destruction of a breeding site or resting place of a European protected species under Section 39(1) of The Conservation (Natural Habitats, & c.) Regulations 1994 (as amended).

Great crested newts and their habitat are protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) and the Conservation (Natural Habitats, & c.) Regulations 1994 (as amended). They breed in ponds but spend much of their lives on land, sometimes venturing several hundred metres from the pond. They often depend on several ponds close together, linked by suitable land habitats. Great crested newts are found in rural, suburban and urban areas. A licence is required to undertake actions affecting great crested newts which would normally be prohibited by law (such as capturing newts, or filling in their breeding ponds).

Information on species licensing and the law regarding protected species in England can be found on the [Natural England internet site](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk) - www.naturalengland.org.uk.

THERE'S A SNAKE IN MY CAR . . .

At a recent conference our ex-Newsletter Editor, Brett Lewis met Dr Betty Platenberg an old herpetile colleague of mine, who now works abroad but who carried out the first ever PhD research on slow-worm in the UK. Recalling their meeting at the conference reminded me of the time I was travelling with Betty to a herpetile meeting in North West London in her battered old blue Citroen CV, which some members may still recall.

Betty loved reptiles and as well as her research on slow-worms she also investigated grass snakes and kept a range of exotic snakes and other reptiles in her home. Well, on our journey around the North Circular road late one Friday night there was a sudden movement in the car and Betty madly grabbed at something unseen that was moving in the footwells. After a few attempts a grass snake was duly extracted and unceremoniously passed to me to babysit until we arrived at our meeting. Apparently it had escaped out of a holding bag and had lived happily in the car for several days, evading capture on a number of occasions.



Betty was one of the re-founders of KRAG in the 1990's and it is great to hear that her energy and enthusiasm for herpetile conservation remains undiminished.

Jonathan Bramley

SNAKE FACT



Question: Do you know how many poisonous snakes there are in the world? Hisssssss...



Answer: There are many venomous snakes but there are only two poisonous snakes. The Garter Snake & Japanese Grass Snake, which become poisonous through eating venomous toads. Croak, Croak.



"TOAD SURPRISE" AT VINTERS VALLEY - A New Recorded Toad Breeding Place -

Until Thursday 12th March 2009 the number of toads recorded at Vinters Valley nature reserve, just outside Maidstone, stood at 5 and I have got to be honest I did not think that our small lake was ideal toad territory, it just seemed to have too many fish and waterfowl and virtually no water plants. With Lee Brady's encouragement we signed up to KRAG's 'Getting Toads out of a hole' project and after training were full of enthusiasm.

Looking at the weather forecast, Thursday seemed a good 'toad spotting night' and so four intrepid toad spotters met up at 6.30pm to see what we could find. Initial investigations in the silt traps at the head of the lake revealed about 15 frogs and a disputed possible toad sighting.

Moving onto the lake itself we were thrilled to see 20 or more toads in and around the shallows and felt that so far it had been worth coming out to find a few toads and frogs. However it was only when we started to walk down the footpath to the other end of the lake that the full story began to unfold.



The footpath is about 40 metres from the edge of the lake and has unmanaged grassland on one side and trees and scrub on the other side, which leads down to the lake. Suddenly there in our torch light were half a dozen small male toads crossing the path heading into the trees and scrub and on towards the lake. As we scanned ahead further there seemed to be toads everywhere all on the march towards the lake. This was so unexpected that we were stunned and stood there just taking in the scene, before our curiosity got the better of us and we knelt down to inspect the hopping treasures. Yes they were toads and yes they were on a mission to reach the water and find females!

As we walked further on, stepping over toads as we went, we just had to keep stopping to check that what we were seeing was real. Could this really be happening, as we had virtually no records of toads previously and not the slightest hint of toads breeding in the lake, over all the years that the area had been a nature reserve.

Upon reaching the open water of the lake we started to see larger females in the water with males attached and a few more hopping towards the water with males already in attendance. Continuing along the footpath around the other side of the lake the numbers just kept rising and eventually reached 152. No doubt there were many more lurking in the undergrowth unseen, and we

have only scratched the surface of the true numbers of toads that are using the lake to breed. Over the next few nights we plan to go back to record actual numbers in a more formal manner, but for now we felt privileged to have witnessed one of nature's miracles, adult toads driven to return to a local breeding pond, to ensure the survival of the species in one small part of the planet.

Over the last 50 years, television has brought the miracles of nature, from around the world, right into our living rooms, but nothing beats going out into real nature and witnessing the miracles for yourself. So I urge anyone who wants to ensure that their children or grandchildren can still enjoy the simple pleasure of seeing nature in the flesh, to go out to their local pond or lake and see if toads still come to breed and if they do, let KRAG know, whilst there is still time to save the toads, before their breeding pond disappears, all because we never knew it existed and did not have time to save it.

Steve Songhurst, Warden, Vinters Valley Nature Reserve

NOW FOR SOMETHING A LITTLE UNUSUAL FROM ANOTHER PART OF THE WORLD

The glass frog is a common name for some of the frogs of a particular frog family.



Generally their skin is green, although some may be white, however they have semi-transparent skin that permits you to view many of their internal organs, hence the name glass frog was coined.

In most cases, you can see the liver, heart, digestive tract and sometimes the lungs of the glass frog due to the translucent characteristics of the skin.

The glass frogs are only seen on the continent of America, in the tropical region. They can be confusing, looking a great deal like tree frogs and unless you view them closely this is what you assume that you have seen.



Looks quite cute, until you look at the underside.

"I am so glad that you cannot see the insides of the frogs in the UK."