

Kent Reptile and Amphibian Group (KRAG)

Field Visits - Health and Safety Guidance

The KRAG recognizes and accepts its responsibility to ensure, so far as reasonably practical, the health, safety and welfare of both its own members and other participants undertaking field visits. KRAG also accepts its responsibility for the health and safety of other people who may be affected by our activities.

Field visits by KRAG generally present only low risks, and are normally attended by people who are experienced in surveying the countryside. Nevertheless, health and safety are the responsibility of everyone, and leaders of field visits have must be prepared to take reasonable responsibility for the safety the group.

The following checklist is intended as a guide to commonsense safety procedure for both group leaders and group members on KRAG field visits.

Be aware of risks

- Always follow instructions and pass on warnings from the owner or manager of the site.
- Give consideration to any particular hazards associated with the site, and give necessary instructions to the group at the beginning of the meeting.
- On sites with major hazards (such as quarries, cliffs, industrial sites and sites close to busy roads), always check routes beforehand and plan to avoid (or remove) hazards wherever possible.
- Where unforeseen hazards become apparent during the meeting, ensure that everyone is aware of the hazard and knows how to behave to minimise risk.
- Where the meeting involves contact with water, everyone should be made aware of the need to cover any cuts or wounds and to wash hands before eating.
- Where there is a risk of tick bites (on sites with sheep or deer), ensure people know how to avoid the risk of Lyme disease (see below).
- You should have access to an appropriate first aid kit. This may be left in a car at the meeting point where the meeting will stay close to this point. Where more distance is to be covered, the first aid kit should carried with the group.
- Ideally, you should carry a mobile phone or know where the nearest pay phone is located.

Be aware of the group

- The leader should be aware of the location of all group members at all times, and maintain a check on safe behaviour.

- If necessary, remind people of any particular hazards for which appropriate clothing may be needed, in particular very uneven ground or steep slopes, wet conditions where waterproof footwear might be needed.

Be aware of the weather

- Be prepared to cancel the meeting if the weather could make it dangerous or particularly tiring, or if people are not suitably dressed for the weather conditions. Shorten the route if necessary.
- Avoid woodlands and steep cliffs in high winds.
- Give general instructions on suitable clothing, and the need for sunblock and drinking water, in the meetings programme.

Be aware of problems at the coast

- Do not plan walks in tidal areas without thorough knowledge of the area and tides.
- Check tide times and allow plenty of time to complete the walk in safety.
- Avoid areas of soft mud.

Precautions to avoid adder bite

One particular risk during KRAG field work is being bitten by an adder. All field workers should be advised to take the following precautions.

- i) Protect feet and ankles with suitable footwear. Footwear such as open toed sandals or shoes that leave the ankles exposed are unsuitable.
- ii) Never put hands into unseen place or beneath refuges. Always lift the edge of a refuge with an 'L-shaped' piece of metal (coat hanger wire) or stick.
- iii) Never attempt to handle adders unless you have been properly trained to do so.

What to do if bitten

If reasonable precautions are taken the chances of being bitten are very low. Of the few people who are bitten a high proportion have been attempting to handle or molest adders, others have been just unlucky. Most bites are on the leg or hand. It is very rare that anyone dies of adder bite and the symptoms vary from some pain and discomfort to more extreme reactions that require hospitalization. In case of adder bite the victim should

- i) be reassured that although painful the bite is unlikely to be serious.

ii) without causing undue fuss or alarm, be taken directly to the nearest source of medical attention for observation. No first aid intervention is recommended for the bite itself other than seeking qualified medical help.

iii) not take any alcohol although there may some benefit from a calming a cup of tea.

Precautions to avoid Lyme diseases

Lyme Disease is an infection caused by a bacterium and is transmitted by the bite of a tick associated with deer. Ticks are found on vegetation in grassland, marshland and woodland, and are most active between April and October. In Kent, deer are found in highest concentrations in West Kent but occur in smaller numbers throughout the county.

The disease may first show itself as an expanding, reddish, round rash in the area of the bite. This rash starts three to thirty days after the initial infection. Early symptoms may resemble influenza with swollen glands near the site, mild headaches, aching muscles and joints, and tiredness. If left untreated, the disease may develop over months and even years, when facial muscle weakness, meningitis-like symptoms, and or arthritis symptoms may occur.

If you have any of these symptoms and you suspect that you may have been bitten by a tick, inform your doctor. Lyme Disease is treatable with antibiotics and the earlier it is diagnosed, the better

What if I am bitten by a tick?

Remove the tick as soon as possible by grasping it close to the skin with tweezers. Apply gentle pressure, twisting anti-clockwise upwards, repeating if necessary. Part of the tick may remain embedded, but you may have prevented the tick transferring the infection to you. Save the tick in a sealed container in case you develop any disease symptoms later.

How to minimize the risk

In areas where deer are found:

- Wear long trousers tucked into socks
- Brush off clothes before entering a building
- Check for ticks when you get undressed
- Keep any ticks found for identification purposes
- Caution other persons about the risk
- If you have been bitten and have any of the symptoms described above, you must see your doctor as soon as possible.

Where deer are present, biting flies may also be present, especially in summer. These flies can cause a serious reaction, especially in sensitive people. Please refer to the section on General Hazards for more information on biting flies

Precautions to avoid diseases associated with water

Weil's Disease or leptospirosis is an infection caused by bacteria carried in rats' urine which contaminates the water and banks of canals, ponds, rivers and ditches. Humans can get the disease by swallowing contaminated water or by contact through an open wound, or if bitten by an infected rat or other small mammal. The risk of infection is highest in slow-flowing or stagnant water where rats are associated with human rubbish or sewage.

Blue-green algae occur naturally in many inland waters and, in still water, can multiply in the summer and colour the water green, blue/green or green brown. During calm weather, the algae can rise to the surface forming a scum. Sometimes the algae can release toxins into the water. Illnesses which can result from contact with algal toxins include skin rashes, eye irritation, vomiting, diarrhoea, fever and pains in muscles and joints.

How to minimise risks

- Where possible, avoid working in water where there is a risk of contamination by rat urine.
- Cover open cuts with waterproof gloves and avoid getting water in the eyes, nose or mouth.
- Wash hands thoroughly with soap or antiseptic wipes, particularly before eating, drinking or smoking.
- Rinse equipment (e.g. pond nets) as soon as possible and allow to dry.
- Take particular care not to get bitten by small mammals.
- If you develop flu-like symptoms, 3-19 days after contact with water that may have been contaminated by rats, then you must contact a doctor and ask for the Elisa blood test.
- Avoid contact with, and particularly ingestion of, discoloured water, which may indicate a blue-green algal bloom
- Visit your doctor if you show symptoms of illness after contact with or ingestion of water that may have been affected by an algal bloom.