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## Adders in Parliament

Chris Glead-Owen, CGO Ecology

Britain's only venomous snake, the adder (*Vipera berus*), has often been in the news over the last year or so. Fears over its apparent decline have raised media attention across the UK, but rarely does a lowly reptile precipitate such fuss as a parliamentary question and a note in Hansard!

Yes indeed, the adder has entered politics. Thanks to a press release circulated after the excellent adder conference organised by Kent Reptile and Amphibian Group in November 2011, heads have been turning in very high places.

Labour MP Fiona O'Donnell (East Lothian) submitted the following written question in January 2012: "To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [Caroline Spelman MP] what assessment she has made of trends in the number of adders in the UK." Richard Benyon (Conservative MP for Newbury, and Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Defra) responded: "Natural England, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Countryside Council for Wales are supporting the work of Amphibian and Reptile Conservation and local amphibian and reptile groups to assess adder populations. Early results of a national reptile survey show that adders were recorded in only 7% of the sample plots studied. If the final report confirms a worrying decline in this species the three agencies will build on existing work with partner organisations and volunteers to enhance strategies to address it."

It is fantastic to see that the Kent conference had such a dramatic effect, and that our voices have been heard. It is also fascinating to see how readily Mr Benyon and his researchers jumped into partnership with Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (ARC), local amphibian and reptile groups under the umbrella of ARG UK and projects like NARRS. Let's hope that these words will bring actions too.

Indeed, it seems that this process has already

begun, and the high levels of concern for the future of the adder have resulted in Natural England,

allocating additional funds to ARC for an urgent assessment of the status of the adder across England - *The Adder Status Project*. Led by Chris Glead-Owen (CGO Ecology Ltd) and Steve Langham (Natural Acuity Ltd), on behalf of ARC, this project has undertaken a comprehensive review of the current status of adders across England, and makes policy recommendations for their future conservation and monitoring.

### What can we do for our native adders?

Professional ecologists and amateur nature-watchers alike have been joining in chorus to call for more research and assistance for this beleaguered species. A genetic project is under way (coordinated by the Zoological Society of London), a national monitoring project 'Make The Adder Count' is being re-launched, and several local projects have all raised media attention. For more information go to: [www.maketheaddercount.org](http://www.maketheaddercount.org)

*Female Adder (Wolfgang Wüster)*



## Grass snakes (*Natrix natrix*) in Scotland

Chris Cathrine, Director of Caledonian Conservation Ltd, member Clyde Amphibian and Reptile Group, Scottish Representative for ARGUK

It is generally believed that wild grass snakes (*Natrix natrix*) do not occur in Scotland, although they are sparsely distributed in both N. Cumbria and Northumberland. While there are a number of records in Scotland, grass snakes were popular pets during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and records have been attributed to escapees.



Grass snake (*Natrix natrix*) © John Baker

However, while undertaking great crested newt (*Triturus cristatus*) surveys in May 2010, Chris Cathrine recorded a grass snake in Dumfries & Galloway. Chris had excellent views of the distinctive pale neck collar as it swam into the pond, confirming the identification. The pond in which the grass snake was recorded was far from any population centres, and located at the border of semi-natural mixed woodland and agricultural land, meaning it is unlikely to be an escaped pet. In addition, grass snakes had previously been reported at this site, but had been dismissed, as they were not believed to be present in Scotland.

This find encouraged Chris to research other grass snake records in Scotland in partnership with Clyde Amphibian & Reptile Group (CARG).

### Analysis of records

Original grass snake record data were gathered from as many sources as possible, including the National Biodiversity Network (NBN), Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), ARC Trust, Biological Records Centre (BRC – including Arnold's 1995 atlas data), local records centres, local

authorities, Amphibian & Reptile Groups and individuals

These data were then plotted in ArcGIS 10 (Figure 2), and thoroughly verified. Verification involved checking grid references, notes, descriptions, habitat, context (compared with other Scottish and English grass snake records), local knowledge and provenance/recorder. In some cases recording schemes or original recorders were contacted for further information.

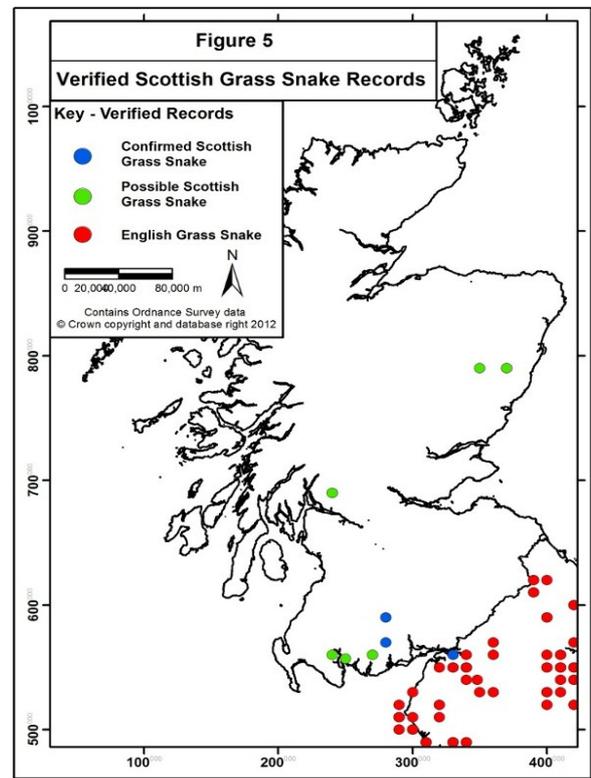
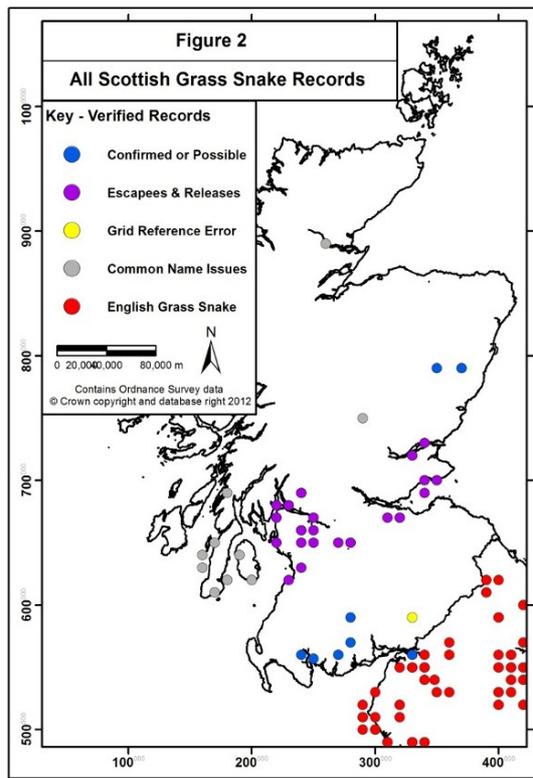
In total, 86 records of grass snake in Scotland were collated, of which 32 were collected from the National Biodiversity Network (NBN) database.

The process of verification highlighted a number of categories of common data errors (see below). It was possible to address all sources of record error during this study, with the exception of race, which would require clear photographs and/or DNA analysis to determine.

Common sources of error:

- **Escapees:** Grass snakes were popular pets during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and pre-1980s records may relate to escapees.
- **Releases:** 200 baby grass snakes were released into Loch Lomond during the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. However, it was not possible to confirm the date of release, and therefore any records from Loch Lomond could not be confirmed as naturally occurring snakes.
- **Grid reference errors:** Data entry errors, e.g. incorrect grid references, are always a possibility. The most common error found lies with the unique two letter 100km National Grid square codes. The Langholm population (Arnold's 1995 atlas, NBN), actually refers to a record from Windermere, where 'NY' was entered instead of 'SD'.
- **Misidentification:** Records were disregarded where the recorder was inexperienced or known to be unreliable.
- **Other Races:** There are c.15 races of grass snake in Europe, of which only one is native to the UK (*Natrix natrix helvetica*). Escaped pets have resulted in non-native races becoming established e.g. a population of Romanian origin (*Natrix natrix persa*) has become established in Yorkshire and North East England.

**Confusion over names:** The common name 'grass snake' refers to the adder (*Vipera berus*) in Argyll & Bute, and to the slow-worm (*Anguis fragilis*) in much of Scotland. This has much potential for confusion.



### Revised Distribution after Verification

Three records (Figure 5) were confirmed as wild grass snakes – all from Dumfries & Galloway and recorded since 2009. None of these records were included in the NBN dataset.

A further six remain as possible wild records that cannot be immediately explained as erroneous or escapes, and range in date from 1960 to 2004. Three of the possible records are from Dumfries & Galloway, and are from less experienced but reliable sources, from appropriate habitat and relatively near confirmed records.

Two independent records from Aberdeenshire in themselves seem unlikely, but in context become interesting as both are from the same catchment. The final possible record at Loch Lomond is from a reliable source, but may relate to the introduced population, already referred to.

These possible records warrant further investigation, while surveys of Dumfries & Galloway will help determine the extent of this population.

### Conclusions

This study has confirmed that grass snakes are present in the wild in Scotland, although it is not possible to determine if they are a recent arrival or have been present far longer.

Grass snakes occur at higher latitudes in Scandinavia, relying on compost heaps and manure piles for egg laying sites, and so may exist as a synanthropic species in the north of their range.

The confirmed records are in areas offering semi-natural woodland, freshwater habitats and agricultural land that may also provide suitable egg-laying sites.

There is no inherent biological or ecological reason why grass snakes would not occur naturally in Scotland. Post-glacial colonisation of the UK has followed multiple successional routes, with different races persisting in the north after they have been replaced in the south. However, it is possible that topography and habitat may prevent the Dumfries & Galloway population from expanding northwards.

Further research is required to clarify the range and origins of Scottish grass snakes. Visual ID and/or DNA studies may help address the race question, while targeted surveys may determine whether grass snakes are breeding in the wild in Scotland. Additional recording by experienced biological recorders and the wider public will also help provide a clearer picture of the distribution of this species in Scotland.

*ARG UK is launching an online Scottish Grass Snake Recording Scheme shortly. In the meantime, please send any grass snake records (old or recent) to Chris Cathrine, and they will be incorporated into the on-going research.*

For further information or to report grass snake records, please contact Chris Cathrine:  
[chris.cathrine@caledonianconservation.co.uk](mailto:chris.cathrine@caledonianconservation.co.uk),  
[www.caledonianconservation.co.uk](http://www.caledonianconservation.co.uk)

## Herpetofauna Workers' Meeting, 27-29 January 2012

Jon Cranfield



An excellent two days of presentations, workshops and updates from the ARGs, topped off with a herpetologically themed quiz at the annual dinner, formed the ingredients of the much acclaimed 22nd Herpetofauna Workers' Meeting.

The welcome return of the perennial favourite *Have I got Newts For You?* on the Saturday night was one of the many highlights of the weekend. The presentations included a range of topics including the perspective of Natural England - past, present and future; SUDs in Scotland; the Sand Lizard Recovery programme; progress on the re-introduction of the native pool frog; an up-date from *Connecting London's Amphibian & Reptile Environments* (CLARE); an up-date on the UK Chytrid Survey (aka *The Big Swab*) and, of course, updates from some of the ARGs in Kent, Warwickshire, the Highlands, Wales and Herefordshire showcasing some of the amazing work done by dedicated volunteers. Freya Smith from ZSL also thanked all the Big-Swab volunteers with special fairy cakes decorated with a herpetofauna theme.

There was also something for everyone in the workshop sessions which covered a range of topics including the issues surrounding practical amphibian and reptile recording; an introduction to the new DEFRA-funded pond surveillance project being led jointly by Pond Conservation and ARC; dealing with negative attitudes to reptiles; and making the adder count.



We were joined by TV personality Nick Baker. Nick obviously enjoyed the quiz - to quote 'this is the best quiz I have ever been to'. As an added extra, the ARG UK 100% Fund was bolstered with an incredible £420 which was raised by the raffle held at the end of the Saturday evening.



Nick also joined the workshop on adders. He got really involved with the group discussion of our only venomous snake and its conservation.

The weekend was rounded off with a presentation from Nick Baker, who left us with his impressions of the Herp Workers' Meeting: 'Keep doing it ... Do it louder!'

Our thanks go to our co-hosts, the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust (ARC) who undertook the organisation of this year's event; to our generous sponsors who included: Pearce Environmental, Herpetologic Ltd, Ecoline, Natural England (NE), the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW), ARC Ecological Services, Wildcare, Pangea Design, and Suffolk and Surrey ARGs; as well as to all of those individuals who donated their time, efforts (and raffle prizes!) to make this meeting such a huge success.



(Photos:  
Angela  
Reynolds, Jon  
Cranfield,  
David Orchard)

## Add an Adder Anecdote

Chris Glead-Owen

Amphibian and Reptile Conservation has been running a web-based adder survey since 2005 called *Add an Adder* ([www.adder.org.uk](http://www.adder.org.uk)). The aim is to raise public awareness about adders, as well as to collect memories and historical accounts that would not normally be accessible as biological records. Since then, well over 4,000 records have been gathered from all over Britain. Whilst some are inevitably misidentified grass snakes and slow-worms, very many are clearly adders. I have been examining the *Add an Adder* data as part of a project for ARC, and some fascinating anecdotes have come to light.

The following was submitted “without any varnishing or embellishment” by Mr Frederick Facey, now aged 93, and a lifelong Devon resident: “I was born in a roadside cottage in the Staddon district of North Devon a few miles from Holsworthy. It was the usual practice of a Sunday evening in summer for my parents to go for and take us children for a walk around the local country lanes. I was about four years old, with two older brothers and baby sister Laura in the pram. We were walking in this lane when I saw some wild strawberries in the hedge. I went



*Above and below : Adders (Wolfgang Wüster)*

to pick some, and an adder (viper) bit my third finger at the base of the nail before the first joint. I of course yelled. My parents rushed us all home. My Dad took off across the fields to another farm nearly half a mile away, to get a friend who had the only means of transport in the area.

He and Dad came after about an hour or so, and on this motor bike and side car, we went off to Holsworthy to find a doctor. This was very difficult on a Sunday evening, but we did eventually. I was by now semi-conscious so I was later told; arms, legs and face swollen and blue/black in colour. The doctor said that poison had spread all around my body. There was nothing he could do, and told Dad to bring me back in the morning if I was still alive. By the time I got home, I was blind and vomiting badly.

Dad went back to the spot we had walked, and killed the adder two days after. It was three days later, so my Mum told me, before the swelling and colouring went down and I could see again.

For the next four years, blindness recurred on a day during the first week of June; the anniversary of the adder bite. The swelling decreased over the next five or so years, but up to 20 years ago, when I was well into my 60s, the effect was of waking up as normal every day during that first week of June, but quite suddenly - with no symptoms and no warning - a retching vomit would occur. After a few minutes, all would be well again and feeling fine. I have lost the nail on that third finger twice because of accidents, but it always comes back the same: misshapen, with a high central ridge, and a distinct V in the centre point.”

## Artificial Refugia

Rose Revera, Cardiff University

A species monitoring project using artificial refugia ('tins') has been taking place at Parc Slip Nature Reserve in South Wales. The use of artificial refugia for surveying herpetofauna is, of course, very familiar to ARG members, but there is some indecision about what size refugia samples a greater species diversity and a greater number of individuals. The survey at Parc Slip addressed this by using two different sizes of refugia, 1m<sup>2</sup> and 0.25m<sup>2</sup>, arranged in sets containing one 1m<sup>2</sup> refugia and four 0.25m<sup>2</sup> refugia (Photo 1), to allow direct comparison of the effectiveness of the two different sizes. The material used for the refugia was corrugated bitumen roofing sheets, which were relatively cheap and easy to cut to the correct size compared to metal. The refugia were checked four days a week, and features such as age class and sex were recorded for each individual seen beneath them.

From August 2010 to June 2011, there was a total of 2858 reptile, amphibian and small mammal sightings. Surprisingly, the highest percentage of the total sightings was small mammals, even discounting the sightings from winter when the herps were hibernating! Therefore, it is worth keeping a record of any small mammal sightings beneath tins.



*Male and female adders (Rose Revera)*

Overall, the most effective refugia size was 1m<sup>2</sup>, accounting for 63% of the total sightings. If surveying for all the herpetofauna in an area, it is therefore advisable to use larger refugia. However, not all the species showed a preference for the 1m<sup>2</sup> refugia. For herpetofauna, 1m<sup>2</sup> refugia were most effective for surveying adders and grass snakes. However, 0.25m<sup>2</sup> refugia produced higher numbers of sightings of common toads, slow-worms and common lizards compared with the 1m<sup>2</sup> refugia. Therefore, if surveying for a specific species, the sheet size which produced the highest numbers of sightings for that species should be used. Great crested newts showed no significant preference for a sheet size, so using the smaller sheets would minimise survey costs, without reducing capture rates.

Temperature and humidity beneath the two different sheet sizes were tested to determine whether these factors had an influence on refugia size choice by species, but there was no significant difference between the two different sheet sizes. It is possible that other factors such as body size or social interactions influenced refugia size choice by a species, but further research is needed to confirm this.

Parc Slip Nature Reserve is owned and managed by the Wildlife Trust of South And West Wales.

If you require any further information about this project, please feel free to contact [info@welshwildlife.org](mailto:info@welshwildlife.org)

*Examining refugia at Parc Slip Nature Reserve (Rob Parry)*

## Agile Frogs in Jersey

Tim Liddiard, Jersey ARG

The agile frog, *Rana dalmatina*, is distributed widely throughout much of southern and central Europe, but is found in only a few northern locations including Jersey (the frog is not found anywhere else in the British Isles). However, the Jersey population of the agile frog has declined in both range and numbers over the period from the early 1900s until 1996. By the 1970s only seven localities were listed where the frog could still be found, and by the mid 1980s this had fallen to only two sites. Now, in 2012 there are four sites.



*Agile Frogs (photo copyright Tim Liddiard)*

The agile frog's European habitat comprises woodlands and wet meadows and, unlike the common frog, *Rana temporaria*, it is rarely found in fields or gardens. It is protected under schedule 1 of the Conservation of Wildlife (Jersey) Law 2000.

The recovery programme has developed steadily over the past decade, and now incorporates a number of facets.

### Creation of new 'wild' sites

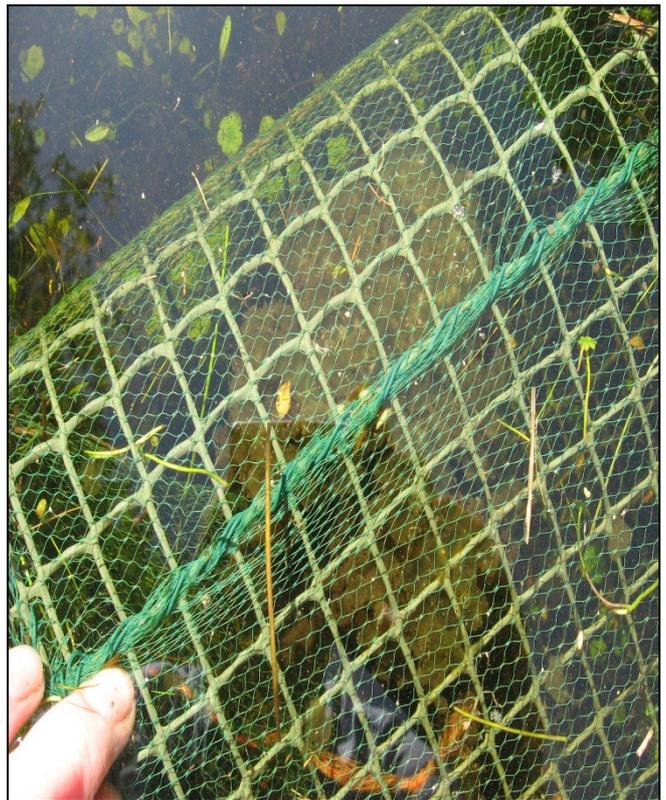
Captive bred tadpoles and frogs have been released back to Noirmont Site of Special Interest (SSI) which was one of the last remaining natural sites. Also, work is being carried out at Beauport and Woodbine Corner to establish new ponds which should be suitable for amphibians. The agile frog has laid spawn at Woodbine Corner since (2010). These sites are managed by the Department of the Environment (DoE).

### Headstarting of wild spawn

Spawn is collected from the wild, the tadpoles hatched in captivity at the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, and then released back into the wild at the time of metamorphosis. By taking the spawn into captivity at the most sensitive stage of the life cycle, it is intended to increase recruitment to the wild population.

### Protection of wild spawn

Wild spawn is, in the main, kept *in situ*, but protected from newt and duck predation using plastic mesh baskets or willow "corrals".



*An agile frog spawn clump within a mesh protective basket to guard against predation from ducks (copyright Tim Liddiard)*

### Monitoring of wild and release sites

The amount of spawn is monitored annually, and night sorties made to sites during the breeding season in an attempt to count reproductively active adults.

### Monitoring of water quality

This has been designed to provide clear evidence of the potentially harmful levels of certain elements that may appear in Jersey's water bodies. All potential amphibian wild breeding sites are monitored (x8 at present).

### Habitat protection

The DoE has continued with the designation of sites of ecological interest. SSI status has been awarded to important conservation areas. Both principal agile frog breeding areas are now within protected Sites of Special Ecological Interest.

### Habitat management

Techniques such as the coppicing of willow and the deepening and enlargement of dune slacks have aimed to provide more suitable conditions for the survival of the agile frog. Management plans for L'Ouaisne SSI, Noirmont SSI and Les Landes SSI have been prepared by the DoE.

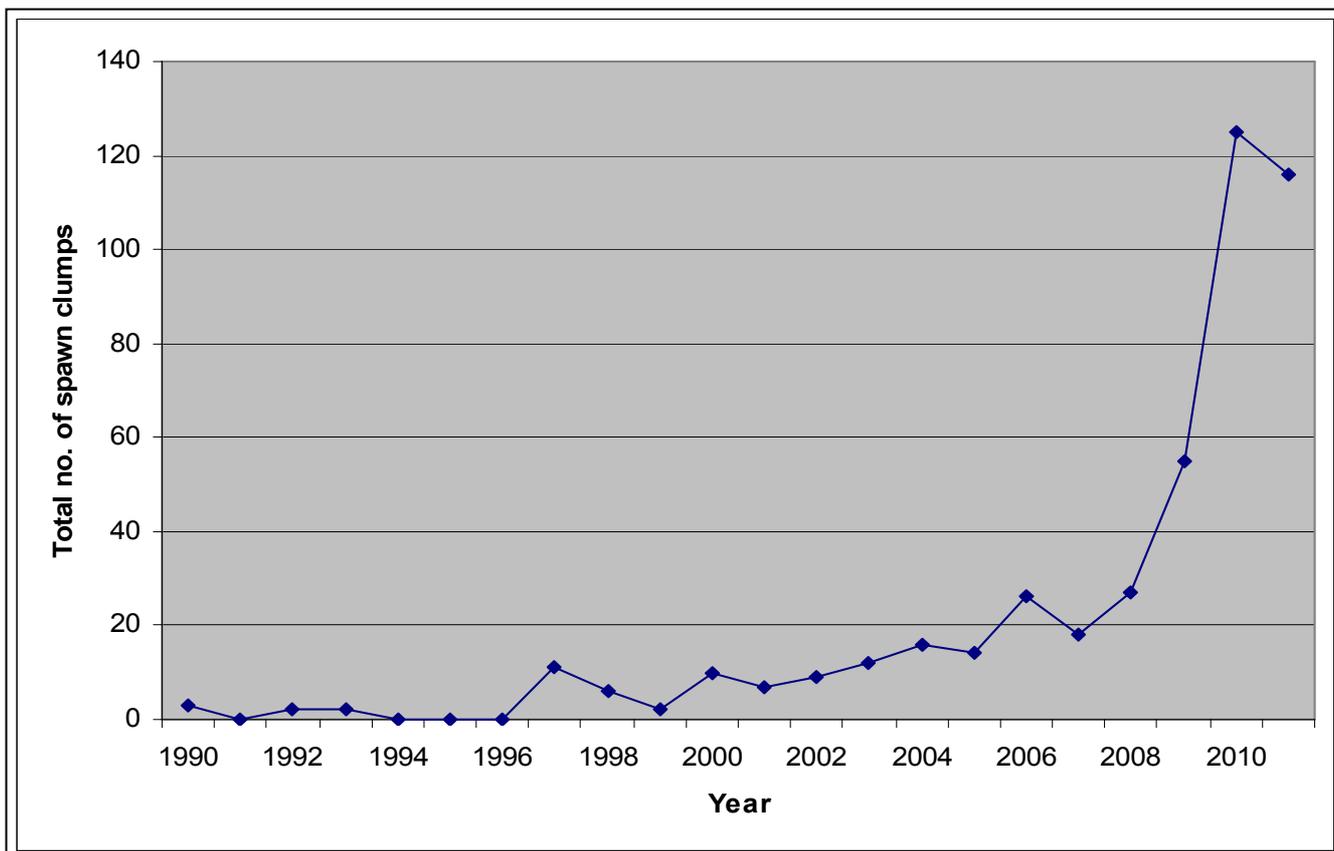
### Education and publicity campaigns

Television, radio and newspaper coverage, visits to local schools and colleges, and printing of posters and leaflets have all attempted to raise public awareness of the predicament of Jersey's amphibians.

By using a wide range of methods, our understanding of agile frogs, their status and requirements, is becoming more robust. The

graph below shows that results have been favourable in that the productivity of the wild population of agile frogs has improved exponentially in recent years as a consequence of applying sound protocols to the project's development. This year, however, the seasonal dune slacks where the agile frogs have laid their spawn are almost empty of water and it looks likely that amounts of frog spawn for 2012 will be similar to that found in 1997 (10 or 12 clumps). Reasons for this decline are yet to be established.

**For more information regarding the activities of the Jersey Amphibian and Reptile Group please visit <http://groups.arguk.org/jarg>**



## How Green is my Valley....Now?

**Colin Williams**

Parc Cwm Darran (in English, Darran Valley Park) nestles in the heart of the South Wales coalfield, in what was once a highly industrialised environment. The Ogilvie Colliery, on the site of which this country park stands, was one of several active mines in the immediate vicinity. Work at the colliery came to an end in 1975 when mining became uneconomic due to flooding and geological problems. Parc Cwm Darran forms part of a network of country parks and nature reserves managed by Caerphilly Borough Council, many of which are situated on former industrial land.

Parc Cwm Darran is a mixed-use country park, featuring a camping site, fishing in the main lake, cycle paths and other amenities for the public. In its extensive area, however, are places dedicated primarily to wildlife.

Maggie Iles, Biodiversity Assistant at Caerphilly Borough Council, was keen to develop the potential of these areas by creating a network of ponds, but found funding impossible to come by until she approached the Million Ponds Project. Just £3,000 secured from that source was converted into an impressive fifteen ponds of varying sizes. These ponds were created in January 2010, and by Spring of that year there was frog-spawn in three of them. By the following Spring frogs were breeding in all fifteen ponds. The ponds were not universally welcomed and Maggie had to overcome opposition to the creation of what some felt were 'unsightly duckponds'. In a relatively short time, however, the ponds became popular with visitors to the park; so much so that Maggie's current problem is overcoming attempts by the public to 'beautify' them with invasive plants. As

### *Hibernacula creation (Maggie Iles)*



yet, there have been no reports of newts in the new ponds, but it would seem to be only a matter of time, since they have been found in the rather less suitable nearby river.

Parc Cwm Darran is also home to a significant population of reptiles. In one particular location there are records of slow-worms, common lizards and adders within a hundred metres or so of some of the new ponds. At the same site grass snakes were at one time seen regularly, but have not been recorded for a few years, though they are certainly present elsewhere in the park. Staff at the park have found hatched eggs in large anthills on the site. Although these can, of course, persist for some time, this encouraged Maggie to think that if more suitable egg-laying sites were provided, together with a hibernaculum, the grass snakes could be encouraged either to return to the site or to thrive if they are still present. To this end, Maggie arranged a joint event between Caerphilly Borough Council staff and volunteers to build a hibernaculum and two egg-laying sites. Maggie approached Gwent ARG for assistance and its members were prominent among the volunteers who worked with the council staff to build these features. The materials required for their creation were provided by the Borough Council. It is to be hoped that the presence of suitable sites for hibernation and egg-laying, combined with an increase in the readily available prey in the shape of amphibians, in and around the nearby ponds, will bring back the grass snakes to this site. The hibernaculum may also prove of benefit to the other reptiles known to be using this site. Maggie also intends to use refugia nearby to monitor the presence of herpetofauna on the site.

Parc Cwm Darran is a prime example of how former industrial land may be returned to nature for the enjoyment of both the local community and native wildlife. Mammals and invertebrates benefit from Caerphilly Borough Council's enlightened management of the park, as well as reptiles and amphibians. As the new ponds mature these benefits can only increase.

The creation of the hibernaculum and egg-laying sites is typical of the good working relationship that has developed between Caerphilly Borough Council and Gwent ARG.

The value of the Million Ponds Project is also demonstrated by the creation of the new wildlife ponds. A relatively small sum of money has been converted into a large number of ponds, and habitat for our herpetofauna. For more information go to: [www.pondconservation.org.uk](http://www.pondconservation.org.uk)

## Venom Day

Colin Williams

On 10 March 2012 the students of the Bangor University Herpetological Society (BUHS) played host to the second Venom Day, which was also supported by the British Herpetological Society (BHS).

Speakers included luminaries such as David Warrell, perhaps the world's leading snakebite expert, and Mark O'Shea. Understandably, most of the talks featured exotic creatures, but our native herpetofauna also put in an appearance. Axel Barlow and Wolfgang Wüster took us through recent research on the evolutionary origins of venom, including the discovery that reptiles long thought to be non-venomous, such as grass snakes and slow worms, actually have venom glands. Kev Palmer also spoke about his research into the effect of vegetation height on adder ecology.

**Look out for Venom Day 3 next year!**

## A Passion in Pictures

### *James O'Shea*

My fascination with reptiles and amphibians began when I was very young. On a visit to my grandmother, we arrived at her home just before sunset and as I opened the car door I saw something that was unlike anything I'd seen before. Baffled, I shouted "Mum what is that?", to which she replied by informing me that it was a slow-worm. I was amazed by the speed at which it moved off into the undergrowth from the warm pavement, despite having no legs!

That fascination grew into a passion, which has never left me. Soon after leaving school I read an article in a local newspaper about a dog

*Wall lizard (James O'Shea)*



being bitten by an adder behind my house. It was only then that I realised just how close I lived to these animals.

This prompted me to contact my local ARG who were very helpful in training me how to find the animals and how to correctly record them. Living in Hampshire, I am lucky enough to be close to all of our native reptiles, most of our amphibians and a few non-native species too.

*Male Smooth Snake (James O'Shea)*



© James O'Shea 2011

From that moment I took every opportunity to get out in the field, making observations and taking notes. I began to combine my passion for herpetofauna with my passion for photography. I find that high quality photographs are the best way to raise awareness about how our native animals are disappearing and about the threats that Britain's wild animals face.



© James O'Shea 2011

*Juvenile Common Lizard (James O'Shea)*

## Around the ARGs

### South-East England and London Regional Meeting

#### **Gail Austin-Price, KRAG**

On the 19<sup>th</sup> November, over 100 delegates descended upon the Medway Campus of the University of Greenwich in Chatham for the ARG UK South East & London Regional Meeting. The day concentrated on the plight of the adder, with speakers from as far away as Switzerland.

The day opened with KRAG speakers discussing successes and setbacks in the field, including: management of chalk downloads; monitoring adder populations; how the data is used and problem solving. Steve Langham followed this by discussing the extensive work that Surrey ARG undertake to conserve the adder, and gave us an insight into how the data collected was being used to tell the story of how the adder is faring in one of our neighbouring counties

The next session started with James Stroud (University of Hull) discussing his Masters research project: investigating the spatial ecology of the adder in coniferous forestry plantations, and looking at the determinants of optimal habitat for existing adder populations in managed forests. John Baker from Suffolk ARG then spoke about the 'Make the Adder Count', a project coordinated by ARG UK, which following a pilot in 2005 is going from strength to strength raising awareness of issues surrounding adder conservation and collating data with the aim of monitoring population trends. Nigel Hand from Herefordshire Amphibian and Reptile Team (HART) rounded the morning session up with an insight into some of the projects he has been involved in, including adder telemetry project in the Wyre Forest, the highly successful "What's that Snake" educational project delivered to 58 schools in Herefordshire, and his current work on the genetic diversity of Britain's adder population, in collaboration with the Institute of Zoology (part of the Zoological Society of London).

KRAG's European partners spoke in the afternoon about their adder work. John Holliday from our one of our French Interreg partners, Conservatoire d'Espaces Naturels, spoke about the adder in Nord et du Pas de Calais, highlighting that both countries have something to learn from each other with regard to adder



conservation. Sylvain Ursenbacher from the University of Basel then presented his work on small and large scale studies of the genetic structure of adder populations in Western Europe. This was quite technical, but Sylvain managed to make it easy to understand and the results were fascinating.



The day was rounded off with a facilitated discussion chaired by Chris Gleed-Owen, who posed the question "What do we need to do to ensure the conservation of adders into the future?" This resulted in a press release, which was taken up by the national press:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2064594/Britains-poisonous-snake-Adder-danger-dying-out.html>.

Photographs from the regional meeting by  
Palinder Perera

## Gwent ARG

### **Colin Williams**

The start of this year has proved to be a busy time for Gwent ARG (GARG).

The first major event of the year was in response to a cry for help. In a small town in the South Wales Valleys, an elderly lady was finding it impossible to maintain the garden pond that had been the pride and joy of her late husband. Not only was it overgrown and silted up, but it was also slowly leaking water. She had approached several commercial firms to repair the pond, but these all lost interest in the work when they discovered that the pond was home not only to a healthy number of frogs, but also a population of great crested newts. In desperation she approached Caerphilly Borough Council, who put her in touch with GARG.

Andy Wilkinson from GARG took matters in hand, ensuring that a licence was in place for the work and organising volunteers. Time was tight to get the work done before the great crested newts arrived at the pond for the breeding season. So it was that Andy decided to go ahead despite some seriously inclement weather on the appointed day.

Snow was falling and temperatures were well below freezing when the GARG volunteers went to work on the pond. The first task was to lift the four-inch thick ice from the surface of the pond. This revealed how little pond was actually left—approximately three quarters of its area was now a tangle of vegetation and silt, to a depth of more than two feet. All of this had to be dug out before the worn out liner could be removed and replaced.

The volunteers had to exercise their eyes as well as their muscles, as there proved to be quite a few frogs in the pond. All in all, fifteen frogs were removed to safety. Fourteen of these were males, either hibernating, or looking to steal a march on their rivals by arriving at the pond early. Also rescued was a solitary smooth newt, which had been hibernating beneath the old liner.

The homeowner was delighted and relieved to have her pond repaired at just the cost of a new liner, but not as relieved as the GARG volunteers were to finish and return to the warm.

Just a few weeks later GARG members gave a presentation on native reptiles to a group of young people in a nearby town. The organisers of the youth group, based at a chapel, are working in partnership with Caerphilly Borough Council to manage the chapel's graveyard in a

manner sympathetic to wildlife. There have already been numerous sightings of slow-worms and one of a grass snake in the graveyard. The Council approached GARG to advise on this project and to help educate the children who attend the group.

There was a healthy attendance from children across a wide age range on the day, with one or two adults sneaking in too. The children responded positively to the talk, though the stars of the show were two pet snakes brought along by teenage GARG member, Rhiannon Williams. These, together with shed skins, were used to illustrate the points made and to give the children an experience of handling reptiles.

As a result of GARG advice the management of the graveyard is to be altered to leave better cover for wildlife, and a compost heap is to be introduced. There are also plans to put in a pond and GARG are to be consulted as to the design. The organisers were left with identification guides and information on how to report sightings. The feedback received following this visit was excellent.

GARG was also actively involve in the project to build a hibernaculum and egg-laying sites for grass snakes at Parc Cwm Darran (a fuller account of this is given on page 9).



*GARG at Parc Cwm Darran (Maggie Iles)*

Last but not least, GARG volunteers, like so many others around the country, have been busy with toad patrols. The area covered by GARG is now wider than Gwent, and covers the whole of South-East Wales, which means that several patrols have to be operated.

For the geographical reasons mentioned above, GARG has been debating a change in its name. Watch this space for developments.

## On the Internet

### **Colin Williams**

Many of you will no doubt be familiar with the web resource at ARKive. If not, be sure to check out this wonderful web-site, at [www.arkive.org](http://www.arkive.org).

The tag-line of the website is 'Images of Life on Earth' and that neatly captures what this project is about. In its own words, 'Wildlife films and photos are vital weapons in the battle to save the world's endangered species from the brink of extinction. So with the help of the world's best filmmakers, photographers, conservationists and scientists, ARKive is creating the ultimate multimedia guide to the world's endangered animals, plants and fungi.'

This is an ambitious agenda, but a fine start has been made and the range of images available is quite extraordinary. Herpetofauna is not neglected and, despite the global focus of the project, our native reptiles and amphibians are well represented.

Access to the site is free, as is use of the images, within certain limitations. Broadly, anyone may use the images for their personal use, research or educational purposes, but check the rules on the website before you make use of any photographs or films.

Above all, do check out this site if you have yet to have the pleasure. You won't regret it!

## Keep in Touch

### **Colin Williams**

It is always great to hear what is happening in the many Amphibian and Reptile Groups around the country. If you have any events to report, stories to tell or results to relay, please let us know.

Copies of any newsletters that you prepare locally are also gratefully received. Other ARG members around the country will be interested to hear what you are up to, and we will be delighted to tell them!

Stories or newsletters should be e-mailed to the editor at [info@arguk.org](mailto:info@arguk.org).

The latest news from ARG UK can be followed on our website, Facebook page and through Twitter presence, if you want more immediate contact.

You can also sign up for our monthly e-bulletin which has the latest snippets of news and views on [www.arguk.org/news/](http://www.arguk.org/news/)

If there is anything you would like to see more, or less, of in this newsletter, please let the editor know at the e-mail address given above. This is your newsletter and we are keen that it reflects your wishes and interests as much as possible.

Above all, we really want to hear about all of your activities, triumphs, news and concerns. We can't publish everything, but we will certainly try to share your news.



OxARG join the children at Horspath Primary School in Oxfordshire to help them find out more about the amphibians and reptiles living in their school nature area.

*(Photo copyright Ellen Griffiths Ulph )*

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*ARG Today* is the newsletter of the Amphibian and Reptile Groups of the UK (ARG UK). It is edited by Colin Williams. All submissions to [info@arguk.org](mailto:info@arguk.org).



**Amphibian and Reptile Groups of the UK**  
VOLUNTEERS WORKING FOR THE CONSERVATION OF AMPHIBIANS AND REPTILES

**amphibian and reptile**  
**conservation**

