



Amphibian and Reptile Groups of the United Kingdom

ARG UK Advice Note 2

www.arguk.org

Establishing and Maintaining a Volunteer Amphibian and Reptile Group (ARG) February 2018

Background

Amphibian and Reptile Groups (ARGs*) comprise volunteers concerned with the conservation of our native amphibians and reptiles. ARGs operate at the local level and are organised on the basis of counties or some other convenient grouping of administrative areas. They are part of the ARG UK network, which supports groups by exchanging information and sharing ideas. This is coordinate by ARG UK, a Charitable Incorporated Organization (Charity number 1165504).



If you want to help with the conservation of amphibians and reptiles but there is no group in your area, or if your local group could benefit from a re-launch, then this advice note outlines how to set up an ARG and, equally importantly, how to maintain one.

Anyone with a genuine interest in herpetofauna conservation can set up a group, provided that the geographic area in question does not already have a group in existence.

*Note that although local groups are often referred to as 'ARGs', group names have variable structures – hence 'ARGs' include 'Reptile and Amphibian Groups (RAGs)' and 'Teams' etc.

Getting Started

Contact ARG UK for initial advice and support (www.arguk.org). Choose a suitable date, time and venue for an inaugural meeting. Contact people from other organisations within your area who may be interested in amphibian and reptile conservation.

Useful contacts could include: ARG UK, neighbouring ARGs, the local Wildlife Trust or branches of a national NGO such as Butterfly Conservation, RSPB, ARC, TCV; or a local wildlife group; local environmental consultants; county museum; local biological records centre; local biodiversity officer, , natural history societies and the local office of the relevant statutory conservation organisation.

Invite interested contacts to your launch meeting. Ask whether they can promote the event within

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their organisation. Local organisations may also be able to provide support in the form of a meeting room, audio-visual aids or other equipment.

Most ARGs work in close cooperation with other local conservation groups – so contacting such bodies early on can help establish mutually beneficial working relationships. An ARG should take care not to replicate ongoing local activities, but rather should increase and enhance conservation action.

Publicise the event to the wider public. Send a press release to local papers and post details on the ARG UK website events page and social media.

The Inaugural Meeting and First Steps

1. Decide on a name and positions of responsibility within the group. These can include several posts but those marked * are key:
 - Chairperson and a deputy to represent the group, guide progress and take overall responsibility for activities and volunteers *
 - Secretary to provide a contact for the group, look after membership, volunteer forms and insurance*
 - Treasurer to administer the group's accounts *
 - Recording officer to organise survey and monitoring, collate records, and access/verify Record Pool records*
 - Events manager
 - Database/Website manager
 - Publicity Officer
2. Agree on the objectives of the ARG. Decide on some realistic targets. Examples could be undertaking a specific amphibian and/or reptile project, toad patrolling, monitoring a limited number of sites of particular interest, conducting habitat work on a limited number of sites, or increasing the group's membership(see below for ARG activities).
3. Adopt a constitution (see appendix) in order to open a bank account.
4. Affiliate to ARG UK (contact the coordinator) to take advantage of the free insurance scheme and the generic health and safety documents and advice notes. Contact details for your ARG will be posted on the ARG UK website, and the group can use the ARG UK logo on its stationary.
5. Do not feel discouraged if only a few people turn up to an inaugural meeting. All you need initially is a core of enthusiasts to run the group and then you can work on recruiting more members.
6. Establish a membership scheme. A membership fee might be charged, which is one way of covering printing and postage costs, purchase of survey equipment, room hire etc.
7. Develop a website to publicise your ARG to the wider world and tell people about your activities and events. ARG UK provides free 'mini websites' (<http://groups.arguk.org>)to affiliated groups, which will enable you to get up and running very quickly. You can use social media for example:

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setting up a facebook group (you can set a moderator option, whereby people need to send a request to the administrator to join), a twitter account, and Instagram.

8. For recording you are also welcome to embed the Record Pool www.recordpool.org.uk, into your web-site. There are various other systems available, and Surrey ARG are currently developing systems for more systematic, site-based reptile surveys. For national recording there is the National Amphibian and Reptile Recording System (NARRS), administered by Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (<http://www.narrs.org.uk/>), and PondNet administered by the Freshwater Habitats' Trust (www.freshwaterhabitats.org.uk/projects/pondnet/).
9. Organise a programme of events to encourage participation by ARG members and in some cases the wider public (see below).

Tips for Running a Local Group

- Advertise a programme of events well in advance using targeted mailings, website (and ARG UK website), social media and a reminder nearer the day.
- Send programme details to other members of the local conservation community to promote within their organisations.
- Include training courses in your events programme. These are usually very popular and are an excellent way of recruiting new members. One possible strategy is to charge a small fee for a training event, which includes ARG membership for a year. ARG UK or ARC can provide support for training events.
- Have regular committee meetings, shorter but more frequent being the best strategy. As your group develops ensure that the constitution is kept up to date, preferably by an annual review.
- Aim to become the local source of advice for amphibian and reptile conservation issues.

ARG Activities

This is a list of possibly activities your ARG may wish to get involved with. It is not exhaustive, and you may wish to pick the activities that most suit your location, membership and local herp species.

- Promoting amphibian and reptile conservation, encouraging the wider public to engage in herp conservation and submit records
- Local focus for all things herpetological in the county
- Collaboration with other wildlife and conservation organisations e.g. mammals, butterfly, bat groups, local wildlife groups and other community organisations
- Species recording and monitoring
- Practical management tasks e.g. pond creation, scrub clearance
- Providing management advice for practical habitat management, and building positive relationships with land owners, and advising them on sympathetic management practices
- Attending local events and outreach
- Running training courses
- Specific projects e.g. toad patrolling, amphibians and drains
- Engage with local planning processes, protecting sites and species

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- Responding to press articles, creating positive media, acting as a resource for local media outlets
- Being an independent voice – can put pressure on other organisations

Maintaining an ARG

ARGs vary in size and in the activities that they undertake. No single group should feel obliged to take on all of the activities suggested above. The work of an ARG should reflect local and national conservation priorities and the interests and skills of the group's membership.

Many ARGs work cooperatively with other local conservation bodies. This ensures that volunteer effort is used to the best effect and in many cases allows sharing of resources (specialised expertise, meeting venues, equipment).

A common concern among groups is that of inactive membership. This is a recurrent issue for voluntary groups. ARGs should engage members as actively as possible, but it is important to recognise the constraints to volunteer commitment. Although ARG members may be genuinely interested in amphibian and reptile conservation not all of them may necessarily have the time to translate this interest into participation in group activities. However, 'inactive' members often contribute money towards running costs and equipment or special projects,.

Most volunteer groups are maintained by a small core of enthusiasts who can nevertheless achieve a great deal. The wider membership should be kept informed by means of a newsletter, preferably in an electronic form to save on postage and printing costs. Where membership is low, an ARG may achieve a great deal by working with other local organisations. A single ARG member can have a large local impact by training members of other local wildlife and community groups in amphibian and reptile survey techniques or habitat management.

Special Projects

ARGs are ideally placed to participate in the development of local Species Action Plans (SAPs), either as partners or lead partners. A local ARG will often have the best knowledge of the distribution and status of herpetofauna locally. Actions could include surveying old sites, restoring old ponds and creating new ones, or habitat management for reptiles e.g. creating hibernacula and basking sites.

Databases and Atlases. The recording officer should aim to keep all herpetofauna records on a database to facilitate data searches and analysis. Distribution maps can then be generated. Some ARGs have taken this a step further by publishing atlases.

Education. Giving talks in schools or to other groups, such as local Wildlife Trust groups and natural history societies, is useful in raising awareness of local herpetofauna. These can generate additional records and will increase the profile of the ARG in the area.

National Projects. National recording projects, such as the National Amphibian and Reptile Recording Scheme, can provide a useful focus for local survey work, and such schemes are dependent on the contribution of volunteers. The annual Herpetofauna Workers' Meeting is a good place to learn about and keep in touch with national projects.

For further help and advice on establishing an ARG please contact the Coordinator of ARG UK (angela.julian@arguk.org).

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