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# Leicestershire Amphibian and Reptile Network

Newsletter, October 1999

As the animals disappear into hibernation for a few months, it is a useful time to remind everyone to submit any herps records for the year, and catch up with a few items that have cropped up during the season.

## Pondamonium

The Pondamonium project, organised by the Natural Life Community Outreach Team at Holly Hayes (formerly the Leicestershire Countryside and Wildlife Initiative) was mentioned in the last Newsletter. Now, as well as the recording forms for ponds, a colourful leaflet entitled "Pondamonium" has been produced. It contains information on the history and natural history of ponds, threats and conservation needs, and how to survey a pond, with a recording form attached. Copies of the leaflet are available from Holly Hayes Environmental Resources Centre, 216 Birstall Road, Birstall, Leics LE4 4DG, tel. 0116-267-1377.

## Leicestershire and Rutland Reptile Survey

Another publication to come out of Holly Hayes, in time for the next season (2000), is to be a Reptile Survey form. Aimed at increasing our knowledge of the four Leicestershire and Rutland reptiles (a Biodiversity Action Plan objective), this will be widely distributed next year. We know rather little about our reptiles, and only the grass snake is widely distributed. Now is the time to start planning your site visits to help with this survey, and it would be useful to concentrate on likely spots for the rarer species – heathland/dry grassland sites for the adder and common lizard, and gardens/allotments/urban wasteland for slow-worms.

## Identification Chart

The Field Studies Council has produced an identification chart in its AIDGAP series covering all the British amphibians and reptiles. A folded sheet with a waterproofed surface, the guide contains colour pictures of all the species, including the early stages of the amphibians, descriptions, maps and sections on life cycles and conservation. A handy guide to carry in the field, it sells for about £2.50.

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## Herps Data

A volunteer, Dorothy Phillips, has been working at Holly Hayes to get outstanding amphibian and reptile data onto the computer system. Hopefully, we will soon be able to have some up-to-date maps produced for the two counties.

## Palmate Newts

Rob Oldham and I met Mick Moffat, the senior ranger at Beacon Hill Country Park, to advise on conservation of the palmate newt population there – possibly the only palmate newts remaining in Leicestershire. Recent management of the two ponds they live in – Frying Pan Pond and Frank's Pit – seems to have been beneficial, preventing overshadowing of the water, and the ponds seem to be in the best possible condition for the newts. Thus the only practical means of increasing the population seems to be by creating new breeding sites.

We suggested that, as the two existing ponds are 300 metres apart, digging a new pond between them would encourage an interchange of individuals between the populations, as well as providing a third pond for spawning. Leicestershire County Council are now considering the possibility of creating new ponds for the palmates without damaging the existing important habitats at Beacon Hill. Incidentally, a newly dug pond in grassland by the lower car park has already, in one season, been discovered by great crested newts.

## Market Harborough GCN

David Goddard has been following events at Market Harborough, where a proposed housing development went to a public inquiry earlier in the year, the main point of contention being the presence of a population of great crested newts on the development site. Whilst the breeding pond was to be retained, the arguments hinged on the extent of dedicated terrestrial habitat which is required in addition. English Nature put up a spirited defence of the colony at the inquiry, but they had previously agreed a compromise with the builders regarding the extent of terrestrial habitat, which may not have been the best approach possible.

The outcome of the inquiry was eagerly awaited, as it could set a precedent for similar arguments elsewhere. The decision allowed the construction of a slightly smaller number of houses to retain more habitat, construction of a newt tunnel to link up different parts of the site, construction of hibernacula and refuges, and gardens to be turfed rather than seeded to allow them to mature more quickly. Whilst these measures are helpful, the development will still put the newts under pressure.

There seem to be a number of lessons to be learnt. English Nature suffered at the enquiry because they had not done proper site surveys, and because they put up one of the regular East Midlands Team staff, who was not regarded as an expert witness on newts. Most significantly, the presence of the newts on site was only revealed at the last minute; if this had been known earlier on, a more effective outcome may have been possible. This just emphasises again the need for us to be aware of all our great crested newt sites.

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## Cropston Grass Snakes

Severn Trent Water has called on the services of the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers to help create grass snake habitat at Cropston Reservoir. The grass snake refuge includes piles of straw as egg-laying sites, sand areas to bask on and underground pipes for hibernation. Volunteers have also been helping to protect spawning toads as they cross roads at Cropston, as well as at Swithland Reservoir.

## Froglife Enquiries

The enquiry service run by the national organisation Froglife has recorded a number of contacts from Leicestershire and Rutland recently, including what sounds like an adder at Billesdon, dying tadpoles at Loughborough, a ruddy-coloured toad at Oadby and frogs breeding again after a mortality at Groby. If anyone wants to follow up any of these, please contact me for further details.

## SINCs for Amphibians

A working group led by Derek Lott has recently been drawing up guidelines for identifying Sites of Interest for Nature Conservation in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland. One of the criteria for selecting SINCs is based on the amphibians present; a site should be designated as a SINC if it meets the following thresholds for one species, or half the thresholds for each of two species present:

Common frog – 50 spawn clumps counted

Common toad – 100 adults counted

Smooth newt – 10 adults trapped, netted or counted at night

Great crested newt – 10 adults trapped, netted or counted at night

Palmate newt – 10 adults trapped, netted or counted at night

These were draft criteria – any comments to Derek Lott at Holly Hayes.

Finally

Don't forget, if you do have any amphibian and reptile records for 1999, do send them in to Holly Hayes. We need all the information we can get!

*Leicestershire Amphibian and Reptile Network*

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