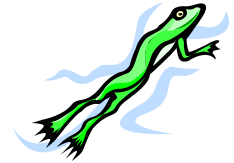


Leicestershire Amphibian and Reptile Network



Newsletter No. 27
April 2016

Pythons in Leicester!

Towards the end of 2015, to general astonishment, it was reported by Adrian Lane, Leicester City Council's Senior Riverside Officer, that, during the course of the year, three or four large pythons, all dead, were retrieved from the waters in the Aylestone Meadows area of the city. The latest was taken on 12 December 2015 by the city's cleansing team, between bridges 105 and 106 on Aylestone Meadows. This one, which was photographed, was tentatively identified (by the county recorder for reptiles, who admits to not being very knowledgeable about foreign reptiles) as a Burmese python *Python molurus* (also known as Indian python, from its area of origin). It measured, when stretched out, just about 2.3 metres.

A second specimen which had been photographed was an albino (highly regarded by reptile collectors), therefore lacking markings and so difficult to identify: this second snake was identified by "Ashby Exotics", an Ashby de la Zouch reptile store, when I brought the photographs to their attention, as another Burmese Python. They also stated that there would be "lots" of people in Leicester collecting pythons - no licence is needed to keep them - so it would be very difficult to track down the source, who would most likely be an individual collector who had reason to get rid of some animals (it was unlikely to be a pet shop, as if caught undertaking any illegal act such as introduction into the wild, they would undoubtedly be closed down).

To continuing astonishment, it was suggested by cleansing department staff that a total of 10 dead pythons had been found in the same area (generally, from Western Boulevard southwards) in a period of 12 years. There was no explanation for this - presumably a local collector of "pet" reptiles wanted to get rid of some (sickly?) specimens, or establish a local population by releasing live snakes, which turned out to be unable to survive in the centre of Leicester (they require much warmer conditions to thrive). Either action would be quite illegal, so the City's Senior Nature Conservation Officer had informed the Police Wildlife Liaison Officer. There is also a need to warn operatives from the City Council, Environment Agency and Canal and River Trust, who might be working in the Soar at Aylestone. Hopefully, further investigation will identify the source and prevent any more releases.

Photographs of the December 2015 python (posed) are shown below, by kind permission of Sam Mullet, Local Area Manager, Leicester City Council, Parks and Open Spaces, Cleansing Services



Leicestershire Herpetological Study Group, from the 60s

In the last newsletter, no. 26, a short article referred to the Leicestershire Herpetological Study Group newsletters of 1965/66 which had been turned up by Ray Morris. The first of these remains largely indecipherable but the second newsletter, dated January 1966, contains some interesting points which illuminate the state of amphibian and reptile studies/issues at that time. The key points from the second LHSG newsletter are as follows.

- Pond Loss – the Group had a project to plot pond distribution in Leicestershire, which gave the following figures: 3 ponds/ sq km; 6400 ponds in the whole of Leics (excluding Rutland); loss of 20% of ponds 1930-65.
- Predators/parasites –several different instances were mentioned: reports of heavy infection of frogspawn by the fungus *Saprolegnia* in Bradgate Park: fish lice parasitising toad tadpoles (see separate report elsewhere in this issue); sticklebacks introduced to a Bradgate pond, leading to loss of smooth newts.
- Aliens - moor frog were reported in Leicester (to be followed up).
- Distribution – species distribution as assessed in 1966 was not a lot different from today, but there are several noteworthy points (not least of which is that the gaps in distribution are still the same today – those areas lacking recorders have always lacked people, apparently). Palmate newts were found at 5 sites, all in Chanwood Forest. The first record of a lizard outside Charnwood Forest came from Tilton. Slowworms and adders were only reported from Bradgate Park. Grass snake was the best reported reptile, but none were recorded from Charnwood Forest.

Fish Louse

The 1966 LHSG newsletter (see above) notes an interesting record generated on 27th June 1965. Toad tadpoles at Lount (SK385195) were found to be harbouring the fish louse *Argulus foliaceus*. This is a species rarely recorded (though it probably turns up in fisheries surveys carried out by the Environment Agency fishery teams). Fish lice belong to the class of crustaceans known as the Branchiura. There are two common species in northwest Europe, *A. foliaceus* being the more numerous in Britain, parasitising any freshwater fish (and, it seems, tadpoles as well).

Herpetofauna Workers Meeting

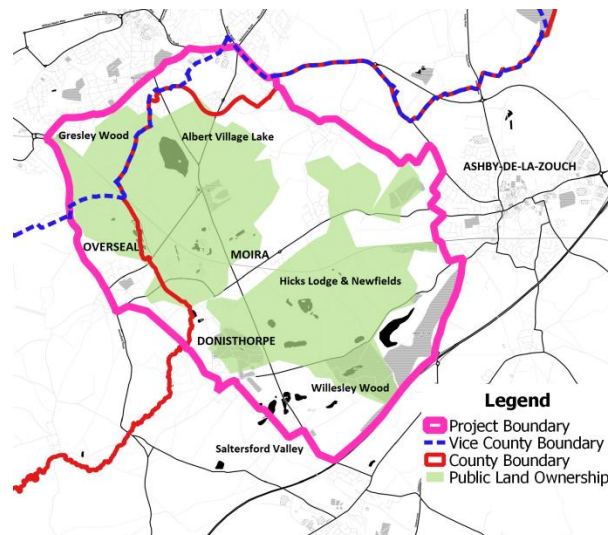
I attended HWM on 6-7 February at a hotel on the outskirts of Oxford. There was the usual mix of interesting talks, without a weak presentation amongst them. Topics addressed included monitoring GCNs, and adders, impacts of marsh frogs, urban frogs, translocating GCNs and slowworms, habitat for grass snakes, toads on roads in Kent and tips for recording aquatic invertebrates. There were also “overseas” presentations on Jersey and Irish herps and the Chinese giant salamander. I seemed to be the only Leicestershire representative; if you get the chance, do get along to future conferences.

Amphibian and Reptile Surveys in the Heart of the National Forest – The Black to Green Project.

The Heart of the National Forest is a 10 square mile area situated around Moira, North West Leicestershire which has undergone dramatic landscape change over recent decades. The newly launched Black to Green project aims to connect people with this rapid change and encourage local communities to work together to survey the wide range of wildlife now using this area.

A central part of the wildlife recording element of the Black to Green project (so called because of the change in this area from coalpits to newly created woodlands), is to better understand local amphibian and reptile populations here. Little high quality or detailed herpetofauna data exists in the area and public landowners in particular are crying out for ecological records to allow them to make effective conservation management decisions.

Map of the project area in the Heart of the National Forest:



Opensource Map, 2016

Records of Great Crested Newts exist in the area, along with notable populations of common lizards, both of which we plan investigating throughout the 3 year project. This year we will be working in partnership with a local MSc student called Karen Bartlett, who will be conducting a detailed study of the common lizard population clusters in and around Moira. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a number of sites support common lizards around Moira, including Hicks Lodge and Donisthorpe Woodland Park (see photograph below of a lizard found behind a dog waste bin last summer).

Common lizard spotted at Donisthorpe Woodland Park last summer:



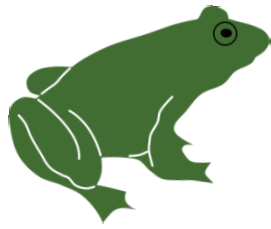
Chris Conway, 2015

We will be updating the group with our findings as they emerge including an up-to-date picture of amphibian and reptile distribution and abundance maps in the Heart of the Forest Area.

If you would like to participate in, or learn more about the amphibian, reptile or wider wildlife recording elements of the Black to Green project, please contact: **Ben Devine** – Community Engagement Officer (Black to Green Project) – bdevine@lrwt.org.uk – 0116 248 7369

*The Black to Green Project is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund who have awarded £770,600 for the project to be delivered over a three year period, and is run in partnership between The National Forest Company and Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust.

Ben Devine



Lizards at Moira

In LARN Newsletter no. 26, there was mention of the cluster of sites around Moira in North West Leicestershire, where lizards may be found. The attraction for these reptiles of this area is presumably the extent of heath-type habitats – at all stages of succession, from the open grass heath of Spring Cottage, through an extensive area of pure heather-dominated (*Calluna?*) heathland on the borders of Hicks Lodge and Newfields Colliery, to the increasingly robust and shady woodland of Donisthorpe Woodland Park. The last is an example of a new woodland planted as part of the National Forest, which has been a major engine for landscape change in this area over the last couple of decades, and to which lizards appear to have been responding, by colonising some of the newly-created sites.

For the record, the sites around Moira at which I am aware lizards have been seen in recent years are: Stonepits, Donisthorpe Woodland Park, Conkers Waterside, Newfield Colliery, Hicks Lodge, Spring Cottage, and Donisthorpe village. It will be interesting to see whether the lizards make it onto some of the other new sites (the main site at Conkers, Sarah's Wood) before they become hopelessly overgrown by scrub and maturing woodland.

My Garden Pond

We have been following the progress of the frog population in our small garden pond in Ashby since 2000 – and this year, 2016, has been a strange one. Frogs appeared back in the pond on 11 February, when two frogs were seen below a thin layer of ice. The frog population built up over the rest of February (9 were counted on the 23rd), and during this period into the first half of March, the frogs must often have been below a significant layer of ice as we had quite Arctic conditions at times, ameliorating at others.

The first frogspawn that we saw this year appeared as 5 floating clumps on 17 March. The weather was dull as well as cold, and it was only on 20 March, when finally we had bright conditions, that we spotted 10 other clumps of frogspawn lying on the bottom of the pond, apparently unfertilised. However, in the subsequent couple of weeks, it became clear that these deep clumps were indeed fertilised, but were developing more slowly than the surface clumps. Some of the deep clumps apparently rose to the surface, which made keeping count of them rather awkward. The final tally, as I write, was 21 clumps of frogspawn in our pond (an average amount, OK for a pond 1x1 metres in size). Of these 21, 10 were laid deep in the pond, 11 at the surface, with the final single surface clump being laid on 4 April. (Thanks to Nathan and Imogen, from next door, who kept up counts while we were away).

I am intrigued as to whether the production of deeply submerged clumps of frogspawn is a response to frogs being ready to spawn but being trapped beneath a layer of ice? Has anyone come across this behaviour elsewhere?

Pondnet

Peter Case is Regional Officer for Central England (including Leics and Rutland) for the Freshwater Habitats Trust (formerly Pond Conservation), which is currently working on a national project called PondNet, a Heritage Lottery funded volunteer survey of ponds across England and Wales. The project is being phased over three years and 2016 sees a roll-out to Leicestershire and Rutland, offering training on pond surveys to volunteers. PondNet uses randomly selected 1km grid squares to survey for; amphibians (Toad and Great Crested Newt), pond quality (recording invertebrate and plant species) and restricted species (rare plants and animals). Much more on the project can be found at:

<http://freshwaterhabitats.org.uk/projects/pondnet/>

PondNet has four randomly selected 1km squares in Leicestershire and two in Rutland, as well as one site in Leicestershire (Skeffington SK7503) and one in Rutland (Rutland Water SK8808) surveyed in 2015. In addition to the pre-selected sites, volunteers can select their own 1km square to survey – this will add data to the network, increasing the strength of the national data.” PondNet is running an amphibian survey training course on 20th April, based around the Nature Alive site (which has GCNs, smooth newts, frogs and toads) on the edge of Coalville.

Stoney Cove

My son, David, has started working at the National Diving Centre at Stoney Cove, between Stoney Stanton and Sapcote (grid ref SP493941). The site is a flooded former roadstone quarry, with some potentially interesting undisturbed habitat. We were interested in what was known about the natural history of the site: having asked the county recorders for all the various groups, the answer seemed to be that very little was known about it, but that a number of recorders would be very interested in doing some survey work there. The only herpetofauna known from Stoney Cove are GCN and Frog - but even these are only possibilities, with the chance that they may have been killed elsewhere and brought in on car tyres, being found in the car park. If anyone has any knowledge of amphibians or reptiles (or fish, or indeed any groups) we would be delighted to hear it – it would contribute to a wildlife report that we are putting together on the site.

Herps, Folk Songs and Customs

As well as my natural history interests (especially amphibians and reptiles), I have a love of music, of many different types, but particularly traditional British and Irish folk music. Folk music (academic study of which falls within the general field of folklore and traditional customs) has a lot to say about our ancestors’ relationships with the natural world. However, there are relatively few instances of amphibian or reptile imagery appearing in folksongs, compared with, say, the number of references to foxes.

I am interested in pulling together what information I can find on the depiction of cold-blooded vertebrates (amphibians and reptiles, but also fish, which I suspect may generate more mentions) in folksongs. There seems to be rather little in this country (American folk song is more productive, with items such as “Frog Went a Courtin’ “) so if anyone is aware of any folk songs (or folk customs) which involve the herpetofauna, I would be delighted to hear of them. I am particularly interested in seeing what, if anything, is depicted of amphibians and reptiles in Leicestershire & Rutland/East Midlands folk song, but information from anywhere in the British Isles would be most welcome - see my contact details at the end of the newsletter.

Andrew

Succession Planning

You may be aware that I am suffering the effects of Parkinson’s disease, a progressive condition, with as yet no means of reversing the process. This means that, within the next couple of years, I may have to give up some of the things I am currently involved with. One of these is coordinating the activities of LARN – which essentially, at the moment, consists of producing this newsletter (once or) generally twice a year, and providing occasional advice on reptile and amphibian matters. Anyone taking on the role of LARN coordinator may want to step up the level of activities of the group: perhaps putting on training days, or organising systematic surveys of particular species, as we have done in the past. There would also be an opportunity to get more involved with ARG UK, the national representative body for all the local amphibian and reptile groups, as again I have done in past years.

The other role which will need filling at some point is that of Leicestershire and Rutland County Recorder for amphibians and reptiles. This involves collating survey data for the herpetofauna of Vice-county 55 (which covers both Leics and Rutland), holding the records on a database (a Mapmate system) and producing distribution maps for the different species, as well as maintaining the knowledge base on the amphibians and reptiles of the two counties. These roles could be covered by one person, as I do currently, or it could be two different people, needing to work closely together.

(I am also county recorder for fish, undertaking the same tasks for the 40 or so freshwater fish in L&R – this again will need someone to pick up the reins at some point).

If you might be interested in taking on one or all of these roles, do please contact me.

Andrew Heaton

Tailpiece

Our travels down under have led us to recognize that Australians, in their usual straightforward manner, are very good at producing public service information. The link below shows an example, related to a herpetological problem that, thankfully, we don't have in this country. It's a hilarious, but serious, warning on the dangers of saltwater crocodiles.

Be Crocwise - English full version: <http://youtu.be/3DoAigtIkGI>

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Apologies for the late arrival of this newsletter, due to family health problems. Because of time constraints, a number of items planned for this issue will be held over until the next newsletter, due to appear towards the end of the survey season. These items include: the importance of Wildlife Trusts reserves for conservation of the whole range of herps species; palmate newt records away from Charnwood; moor frogs; management work at Bradgate Park; and GCN eDNA!

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Leicestershire Amphibian and Reptile Network (LARN) is an informal grouping of people interested in the status and distribution of these two lower vertebrate groups in Leicestershire and Rutland. The group is held together by a newsletter produced on an irregular basis – generally twice a year. The aims of the group are to encourage recording of herpetofauna in the two counties, and to use this data to support conservation initiatives. Anyone wanting to join the group should contact the coordinator, Andrew Heaton, as below.

If you have any news for the next edition of this newsletter, do let me know.

*Andrew Heaton, 19 Rydal Gardens, Ashby de la Zouch, Leics LE65 1FJ
Tel. 01530-467904
aheaton@ntlworld.com*