

# Warwickshire Amphibian & Reptile Team

Brandon Marsh Nature Centre, Brandon Lane, Coventry CV3 3GW. Tel (02476) 302912 Fax (02476) 639556  
Affiliated to the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust (Registered Charity Number 209200)  
and Herpetofauna Groups of Britain & Ireland.

[www.wartsoc.co.uk](http://www.wartsoc.co.uk)

**WART NEWSLETTER: ISSUE NO. 35 WINTER 2003/2004**

*Forthcoming events*

## **Amphibian and Reptile Day**



**Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> March**  
Brandon Marsh Nature Centre  
Brandon Lane, Coventry  
10am – 4pm

The morning will concentrate on amphibian identification and surveying techniques along with habitat management techniques. The afternoon session will be based on reptiles.

There is a charge of £5, but WART members will get a special 50% reduction of £2.50 each. Themes for the day will include garden ponds, pond survey training, habitat management, applying for a Great-crested Newt licence, adder survey update, reptile survey training. To reserve your place, phone the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust on (02476) 302912, and mention that you are a WART member to get your discount.

## **Reptile Day**

Saturday 24 April

10am to 1pm

at Close Wood

WART has been working with Forestry Enterprise to lay refugia in order to validate the adder record here. Learn more about reptile surveying.

## **Amphibian Day**

Saturday 1 May

4pm to 10pm

Following the success of last year's visit to Cannock Chase, we intend to repeat the day and hopefully find some natterjack toads this year. Nevertheless the site is crawling with crested, palmate and smooth newts and provides a great opportunity to hone your newt identification skills.

To register your interest in these events please contact Jan. (contact details below).

## **Kenilworth Common: Guided Walk**

Saturday 26 June

10 am

Take a look around one of Warwickshire's best reptile sites with this guided walk, organised in conjunction with the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust. "Insight into Reptiles" costs £2 per person, further details from Howard and Serena, see below.

There are also regular management sessions on the last Sunday of each month. The activity involves cutting or pulling bracken to open up areas to reptiles for basking. Contact Howard and Serena Eccles for details, tel (01926) 858378.

## **Contacts**

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# Treasurer's Report

RECEIPTS	2003	2001/2	PAYMENTS	2003	2001/2
Bal as @ 31/12/02			Printing		
Bank 1156.57			Extra for 2001/2 16.25		
Cash 16.60	1173.17	1137.90	For 2003 22.05	38.30	5.99
Subscriptions	153.50	196.50	Postage & Stationery		
Donations	16.80	3.00	Extra for 2001/2 15.74		
Sales	10.35	36.50	For 2003 74.41	90.15	37.64
Refund of Ins. Premium	-	3.34	Printer Cartridge & Proj. Covers	55.45	-
			Herpetofauna Workers Meeting costs	120.00	-
			G.P.S. units	253.11	-
			Purchases		
			Software Package 136.44		
			Website tools 20.00		
			Loss on Dorset trip	-	4.00
			Bal as @ 31/12/03		
			Bank 780.21		
			Cash 16.60	796.81	1173.17
	1353.82	1377.24		1353.82	1377.24

## The National Biodiversity Network

<http://www.nbn.org.uk>

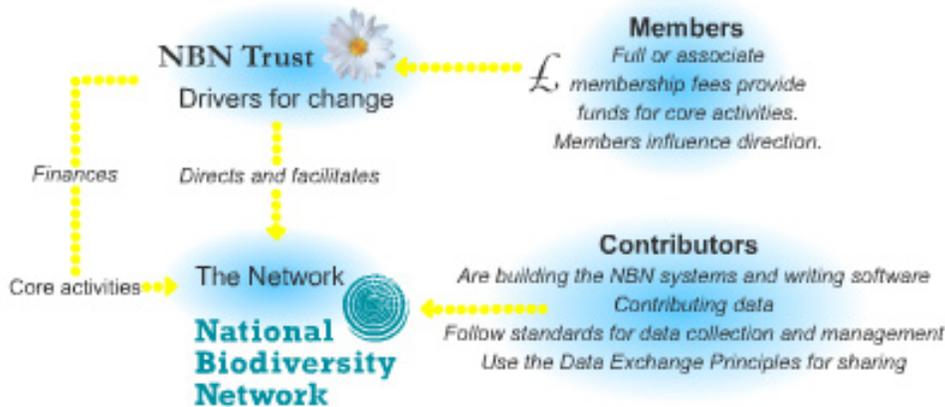
The NBN is a new and innovative way of sharing wildlife information in the UK and is building tools to make this information accessible in a digitised and exchangeable form. By providing easy access to the information people need about wildlife, wise and informed decisions can be made to ensure our natural environment is diverse, rich and sustainable now and for future generations.

The **NBN Trust** is the organisation facilitating the building of the Network. By engaging with its membership, mainly public and voluntary bodies and with other non-member organisations committed to the objects of the Trust, it is able to draw upon a broad range of skills and resources needed to develop the building blocks for an effective NBN system. The NBN Trust is registered as a company limited by guarantee and has charitable status. Its Memorandum and Articles of Association give a sound basis for the partnership of different organisations to come together to achieve their common purpose – to create and run the NBN. The present partnership consists of public and voluntary organisations.

The organisations listed in the knowledge base article are current members of the Trust and we are working towards a broader membership in the near future. You will note that membership is mainly at the organisational level, although there are provisions in our articles for individual membership in special circumstances. We hope the principal scientific and natural history societies throughout the UK will also become members of the Trust as well as other organisations collecting and collating biodiversity information.

## Do I need to be a member of the NBN Trust to contribute data?

The short answer is no. The NBN Trust is a membership charity and collects subscriptions to fund its activities. Its main activity is facilitating the building of the Network. If you are a member of the NBN Trust you will be involved at a more strategic level. You will have an opportunity to vote on new Trustees to the Board and vote on how the charity is governed.



If you wish to contribute data to the Network you do not need to be a member of the Trust, though all subscriptions are gratefully received. The systems in place at the

moment for contributing data are limited, and are currently under review. If you are keen to get involved we will be producing a series of guidance and advice via this web site so keep watching this space.

A contributor is an organisation directly involved in building the National Biodiversity Network. For example this could be by preparing data sets for accessing on the NBN Gateway, personal involvement with recording activities, or involvement in finding and developing technical solutions and systems that are needed to establish the network. If your data is accessible through the Gateway you are also an NBN Contributor.

### **This is what they say about submitting data.**

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### **Now the scathing bit.**

The above would appear to be a very good idea. But in early 1997 Jan and myself attended the inorgoral meeting of the NBN at JNCC HQ in Peterborough. During this meeting I mentioned that any database that is used must be able to import data from existing databases. "The BHSCC Database had at the time had some 30,000 herpetological records." **Well they still have not done anything about this major problem!** And until they do a vast amount of data will not be available to the NBN. And I know the WBRC database is incompatible with the NBN.

**Nigel Clemons**

# Chairman's Report

The most successful project during the year was the launch of the WART Adder Group. Over 20 volunteers volunteered to survey 1 or 2 of the 18 sites we had adder records for. Overall I feel we have spent the first year getting things right and are well on the way to putting the record straight. For example, one of Alan Preece's sites turned out to be in the middle of a village. This seems odd, unless an adder turned up in someone's garden. (House-to-house next year Alan). One trend has emerged – some adder sites are also grass snake sites and could the latter have been identified as the former?

For my sites, there were difficulties getting permission off landowners to survey. Despite Corley Parish Council taking 3 months to give permission, this led to a useful contact who may have adders on his farm. From this contact we have heard where there is a good supply of refugias (tins). We can now use the Trust's pick-up truck to go and collect them. The Forestry Commission have also arranged to drop off some refugias for the big site at Close Wood. A major limitation has been collecting enough refugia, so hopefully our volunteers can now be supplied with more. I know they've had their own set of problems but I feel optimistic we can have a better go this year.

Would all WART members put Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> March in their diaries please? WART is organising an amphibian & reptile training day at Brandon Marsh (details of which are on the front page). I am hoping that members of the adder group will be able to attend and of course other WART members as we still need more adder surveyors. It will not take up much time – the more surveyors the better the coverage and the sooner we set the record straight.

Whatever the case the survey needs to be ongoing. A recent paper titled 'Inferring the absence of a species – a case study of snakes by M Kery (*Journal of Wildlife Management* 66, 330-338) makes interesting reading. The author set out to discover how many visits are necessary to prove that a snake species is definitely absent from a site. Despite the work being carried out on the continent it did involve two British species (grass snake & smooth snake) as well as the asp viper (*Vipera aspis*). The research showed a dependence on habitat type & time of year and used mark & recapture techniques to estimate population size. Kery has concluded that to be 95% confident of absence, sites must be visited **at least** 12 times for asp vipers, 26 times for grass snakes or 36 times for smooth snakes. We know the adder (*Vipera berus*) is the rarest snake species in the county. Is this our continental smooth snake? You can now see why I think the WART Adder Group needs more volunteers.



Another highlight was WART's 10<sup>th</sup> Birthday Bash at Cannock Chase. Despite the absence of Natterjack toads it was newt paradise. It's not often you get the chance to see all 3 species and the visit provided the opportunity for us to hone our amphibian identification skills. We hope to visit the site again (sooner rather than later).

Membership remains buoyant, with new members joining to offset those leaving; we currently have a membership base of 58. Nigel Clemons has really streamlined membership administration, even sending further reminders to members when their membership is overdue. Remember to visit the excellent WART website if you haven't already done so. Managed by Nigel, the site had over a thousand 'hits' in 2003 and you can download survey forms. There are also links to other websites with a herpetological/conservation theme.

WART are continuously grateful to Warwickshire Wildlife Trust for their continued support. Alan Preece is a capable & enthusiastic Vice-Chairman who has a genuine love & affection for all things herptile. It is good to report that Lee Miles has been elected onto the WART committee and will become our insurance & training officer. Our links with the BRC at Warwick Museum continue to flourish. As well as Jane O'Dell & David Cole, the WART committee has co-opted Louise Slack who is a first class ecologist, onto the committee.

Louise has a lot of experience in dealing with cases where amphibians & reptiles may often be threatened. Helen Mayne (formerly Newell) still continues to produce 3 newsletters per year, despite often being without much material, she still manages to do a sterling job.

The enclosed treasurer's report shows that printing & distribution costs were higher in 2003 and WART purchased computer hardware & software using money that had been kindly donated by Ian Tanner & Louise Slack specifically for GIS technology. I am pleased to report that Wart membership will remain at £3.50 per annum.

Finally, I would like to thank all WART members (active & sympathetic) for your continued support. Why not come & join us on a WART activity this year?

Jan Clemons  
Jan 2004

# The WART Committee

Chair	Jan Clemons
Vice-Chair	Alan Preece
Secretary	Andi Wolf
Membership Secretary	Nigel Clemons
Treasurer	Howard Eccles
Newsletter Editor	Helen Mayne
Insurance and Training Officer	Lee Miles
Ordinary members	Jane O'Dell, Serena Eccles, David Cole, Louise Slack (co-opted)

## Snakes Alive

In November 2003, I attended a British Herpetological Society Scientific Meeting at Birbeck College, London. The theme for the day was the ecology and conservation of British snakes. Eight speakers, including herpetologists from Italy & Holland gave talks on adders, grass snakes & smooth snakes. As the WART Adder Group has embarked on a survey of known Warwickshire adder sites, I wanted to learn more about this particular species.

John Baker of Froglife talked about the status of the adder in England, which was based on a questionnaire survey from over 60 reptile recorders (including yours truly). Undoubtedly, the adder is in decline throughout its range, but adder declines were most severe in the West Midlands. At the time of writing adders have only been seen in the past three years at three sites in Warwickshire and the adder population in the Wyre Forest (studied for many years by Sylvia Sheldon) is under serious decline. John concluded that such a survey only got replies from areas of England that have an Amphibian & Reptile group and that for many counties, lack of recording effort means adder status is unknown.

Tony Phelps from Dorset talked about reproductive strategies of the adder in southern England. From years of observing adders in the field, Tony reported that males and females shedding their skins usually herald the breeding season. The males moult the second week of April (10 day window), the females moulting 10 days before. The males guard the females for 4-5 days, to keep other males away. During this time the famous 'adder dances' can be observed. Essentially it's a question of strength with the largest & strongest male winning the contest. The whole mating process is obviously energy consuming with males losing over 10% of their body mass. In addition:

- Adders show pronounced fidelity to sites (up to 30 years)
- Adders follow scents of other individuals
- There is a higher rate of fecundity in large snakes, due to sexual selection
- Survival rate is higher for larger animals
- Recruitment via random dispersal of young snakes is slow
- Females lose 55% of their body mass during pregnancy
- The biennial cycle with females becoming pregnant every two years may not be true for certain animals. There have been big gap years for certain females but this may be a blueprint for female survival?
- There is up to 90% mortality for immature & sub-adult adders

- Using head markings to identify individuals, adders can live up to 30 years.
- Female adders aged 5, 6 & 7 years are best at surviving pregnancy

Tony's talk was fascinating and highlighted the need for long-term studies of this rapidly declining species.

Rhys Jones of Cardiff University is carrying out work on the molecular tracking of British snake species. Shed skins, faeces, road kills & museum specimens can all be sources of DNA. From looking at genetic fingerprints, genetic diversity and population structure can be measured. This molecular tracking can also show how snakes colonised the British Isles. Also the DNA of prey species can be obtained from faecal samples. The team perfected the technique in the lab using kingsnakes before venturing out into the field. The project is currently in the early stages but will no doubt shed a light on many aspects of snake biology.

Luca Luiselli (Rome) & Pieter de Wijer (Amsterdam) gave talks on grass snakes. Despite not studying grass snakes in this country their work is certainly applicable to British grass snakes. See below:

- Grass snakes have a home circuit between 4 – 7.5 km.
- They show a strong fidelity for egg-laying sites, returning year after year
- Many females migrate up to 7km to reach the egg-laying site
- It takes time for the egg-laying sites to mature
- Longer migrations represent a good gene flow
- Death-feigning is found in 3 families of snakes and is only used as a last resort after crypsis or fleeing.

The final session was on Smooth snakes, which have a restricted distribution (Dorset & Surrey). Speakers included Chris Reading of the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology who has been studying for many years a lowland heath smooth snake population. Chris Gleed-Owen (ex-WART member) now employed by the Herpetological Conservation Trust spoke about his efforts to determine the conservation status of the smooth snake in Britain using a GIS system.

As in most cases, a meeting like this gives the delegates a chance to catch up with old friends and do some networking. Thanks must go to Mike Preston of HCT who treated me to lunch & Will Watson of Worcestershire ARG for buying the drinks! An informative and entertaining day was had by all.

Jan Clemons

Illustrations by Nicola Angell.

Contributions for the newsletter should be sent to Helen Mayne.

Copy deadline for next issue: 31<sup>st</sup> June 2004.