

BHS/AHH Annual Conference was a resounding success

*Author(s): **Thomas Marriott**, Executive Editor (RHF)*

The UK's leading reptile-related conference concluded on 16th March to widespread praise from delegates. Each year, the British Herpetological Society and Advancing Herpetological Husbandry join forces to organize an event that bridges the gap between private herpetoculture and academic and zoological study. 2025's event, saw 110 delegates attend the two-day event with about 165 people in the conference in total, including sponsors, speakers and organisers.

This year's event comprised familiar faces and structure, with new sponsors, workshop sessions and a wider variety of stalls, talk topics and catering. The changes may have been subtle but retaining the core values and community feel whilst exploring a few new options made for another fantastic iteration, well worth a placement in any herp-enthusiast's calendar.

About the Conference

The British Herpetological Society is one of the world's oldest and most prestigious herpetological societies. Advancing Herpetological Husbandry is one of the world's largest online communities of reptile keepers. Together, BHS Trustees and AHH administrators share not only a passion for reptiles and amphibians, but similar goals and ideas. Overlaps between members and communities create a wonderful atmosphere at events when well-known figures are present to invite new hobbyists into the highly dedicated circle of enthusiasts. So, when Mark Hollowell, Chair of the British Herpetological Society opened the event with the question "who here is attending this conference for the first time?" and 50% of the room raise their hands, it was clear that this event would be impactful.

Frances Baines, one of the most influential people in the world of reptile lighting, greeted delegates and was present to answer questions. Roman Muryn, a key figurehead in shaping our understanding of infrared light in herpetoculture ran two workshops and shared his knowledge with people. TV personality and renowned herpetologist Mark O'Shea was present all weekend to share stories and deliver some dramatic after-dinner insights into his own career.

Lighting questions could be answered by consultant Thomas Griffiths (Tomaskas) and industry expert Sarina Wunderlich. There was also input from vets, field researchers, reptile breeders and just about everyone in between. Over the course of two days, almost any reptile-related question could be answered, whether that be after a talk or over a beer.

Delegates attended from Denmark, the Netherlands, Poland, Germany and the US. Roman Astheimer, a member of the DGHT was also in attendance and played a pivotal role in the organising team.

Day One Morning

The first official day began at 8am, when delegates gathered in the Tower suite at Drayton Manor Resort. The hotel-cum-theme-park has become the spiritual home of herpetological conferences in recent years. Located in the West Midlands, Drayton Manor is perfectly located for a broad range of people. Hosting an impressive reptile collection itself, Drayton Manor offers free usage of the conference center as a donation to support staging of the event. This donation alleviates financial pressures and allows the small ticket sales profits to be retained as seed funding for future events.

Once all delegates had received their name badges and lanyards the event began. Mark opened the event with a short introduction, before this year's keynote speaker, Bart Spanoghe delved into the world of Lacertidae. Visiting from Belgium, Bart has kept and bred a wide range of European Lacertids in both indoor and outdoor vivaria for decades. He talked through husbandry, enclosure design and morphology, with a backdrop of dozens of excellent photographs of a wide range of species.

Second to the stage was myself, Thomas Marriott. I was invited to share some of my observations of herptiles across the world and considerations for captive care. I focused on sex-related differences in *Atelopus*, *Furcifer*, *Pogona* and *Lyriocephalus*, special ecology observations of *Correlophus ciliatus* in New Caledonia and *Uroplatus phantasticus* in Madagascar and habitat differences of various dendrobatids across Latin America. Perhaps a review of my own performance is somewhat biased, but I was pleased to receive some very nice comments from attendees after the talk.

After a short break of tea, coffee and cookies (as well as squeezing in as many greetings with friends old and new, questions and updates on personal collections and professional networking) Kieran Richardson of Chester Zoo presented. He provided a broad overview of the zoo's recent captive breeding successes. These included work with *Calumma parsonii*, *Erpeton tentaculatum* and *Uroplatus henkeli*.

The morning session was rounded off nicely by arguably one of the most in-depth talks of the weekend. PhD student and herpetologist Benjamin Owen shared his experience of keeping and breeding sailfin dragons. From enclosure design to field observations, history in the trade to acclimation, the 45 minute talk covered everything related to *Hydrosaurus amboinensis*. The talk was tied together with a segment from 'Life on Our Planet' from Netflix, in which Morgan Freeman narrates the hatching of a clutch of Benjamin's *H. amboinensis* eggs.

A hot lunch of kebabs, cheese and garlic pittas, fish filet and vegetarian tacos was served. Unlike previous years, when sandwiches were provided from Drayton Manor's main hotel, 2025 saw excellent food served within the conference venue. A minor change that proved to be well-received by guests, whose deep and thorough discussions on herpetology were interrupted only briefly by some freshly cooked food.

Day One Afternoon

Before lunch finished, delegates had the opportunity to view student posters. Since the conference's inception, student posters have played an integral role. Young academics are given the opportunity to share research without having to present.

Five posters were displayed. They were submitted by students in the UK, Warsaw, the USA and Sri Lanka and covered a range of topics. The BHS/AHH offer a prize for the 'best' poster. This year the Tell Hicks' print went to Gabriel Stroup, from Utah in USA for his piece titled "Behavioural Profiles: Visualizing Reptile Behaviors to Improve Reptile Husbandry and Data Accessibility."

The afternoon kicked off with an entertaining presentation on *Neuregus kaiseri* by Paul Tapley. Genuinely funny and scattered with punchlines, "Have I got Newts for You" was a wonderful introductory title. Perhaps Paul did too much of a good job, as I overheard at least 5 people talk about how much they wanted to keep the charismatic newts in the future.

After a morning heavy with science and captive breeding, Jane Williams offered a fresh take on tortoise husbandry by looking at *Chelonia* mental health. Her straight-to-the-point approach offered food for thought for all keepers.

After another quick coffee, Erin Rickman picked up the captive-behavioural-study-baton and ran with it. Erin runs the Anglo-American Reptile Research Laboratory in Florida. She presented her talk digitally and focused on assessing the welfare of captive leopard geckos and bearded dragons concluding that naturalistic enclosures provide a better environment for captive lizards.

Soon after, delegates were invited to visit the zoo. A small but beautifully constructed reptile house lies at the centre of Drayton Manor's 15 acre, 100+ species zoo. From tiny Maranon poison frogs (*Excidobates mystriosus*) to an enormous anaconda (*Eumeces murinus*) the collection is quite impressive. Mixed-species exhibits and well-constructed backgrounds make the reptile house a well respected exhibit, even amongst the UK's most dedicated reptile enthusiasts.

Day one concluded with an evening dinner. After a hot meal and some interesting discussions, Mark O'Shea took to the stage to present "Blood, Sweat & Snakebites: The Making of a Herpetologist". The biographical presentation was slightly derailed by sheer passion as Mark shared countless stories of his early career and, after reaching the time

limit, quickly skipped through a few dozen slides containing images of Papuan snakes, snakebite work and various other aspects of his later career.

The presentation was followed shortly by a quiz. A mix of reptile-related and general knowledge questions made for a thoroughly entertaining end to the evening. What was supposed to finish at 23.30 ran into the early hours with many delegates taking full advantage of the 24 hour bar. Whilst the BHS/AHH event is characterized by science and civilization, the once-a-year opportunity to share a few beverages and 'talk reptiles' with like-minded people certainly drives one to indulge in an extra beer or two.

Day Two Morning

Starting at 8am, the second day of the conference requires less 'signing in' and introductions. Instead, delegates made a beeline for the stalls that had been operating all weekend.

Brands at the event included ProRep, Blue River Diets, White Python, ExoTerra, Reptile Systems, Arcadia, Habistat and ZooMed. Artists included Leon Hicks, Tell Hicks' son, who was selling Tell's prints and John Noble-Milner (Geckoman), a bronze sculptor who produces various artworks of anatomically correct and stylized reptiles and amphibians. The unique work certainly grabbed the attention of delegates and it was great to welcome John to his first BHS/AHH event.

Other stalls also focused on various organisations within the hobby, there was of course, a British Herpetological Society stall as well as European Turtle Alliance and International Herpetological Society stall too.

Alan from Safe4 was in attendance to educate keepers about the regulations surrounding disinfectants. Alan attends many of the big zoological events, but his presence at AHH/BHS and workshop on risk assessment equipped everyday keepers with precise zoological knowledge.

Stuart Priest represented World Life Safaris, a new reptile expedition and ecotourism company, offering various herping tours across the world. Stuart is a long time member of the BHS and integral part of the community, so to see his co-owned business flourish at the event was great.

Talks on the second day were provided by various speakers. Snake behaviour scientist, Lori Torrini dialed in to present expert advice on training snakes. She offered a step by step approach that outlines the primary training methods for serpents. This was soon followed by an insightful look into 'follicles' by veterinarian Dr Marie Kubiak. Whilst the shocking images of retained an infertile eggs may have been eye opening, it gave keepers of tortoises and yemen chameleons a new potential diagnosis to add to their

observational health checks. This valuable information could potentially save animal lives.

After a coffee break, workshops began. With five to choose from, each operating twice, it's hard to give a comprehensive review of all of them. Roman Muryn presented a new methodology for assessing infrared radiation and power density. The technique is low-budget and may revolutionize how keepers, zoos and brands measure their bulbs. Thomas Griffiths' workshop was extremely popular and focused on installing the correct lighting into a terrarium. The Q&A opportunity alone drew in large crowds. Cyril Geoffray of Zoo Med Labs taught delegates how to create the best bioactive setup and things to look out for. Marie Kubiak offered an open Q&A session for anyone to ask anything to a professional exotics vet. Alan Dudley from Safe4 taught keepers how to do a COSHH assessment, which proved popular with zookeepers.

Day Two Afternoon

After a lunch of chicken skewers, salt and chili squid and mixed salads, the final talks proceeded. Keynote speaker, Bart Spanoghe presented a second talk, this time on melanism in *Timon lepidus*. His lecture epitomized the value of the event well, offering unique insights that only someone with decades of experience with a particular species would know.

Charles Thompson later shared some startling statistics about the exotic pet trade in the UK. Referring to the many millions of pounds that the industry provides the UK in taxes, salaries and other revenues, the 100+ delegates in the room were reminded just how important pet keeping is.

Grainne Hartigan introduced us to Nature's SAFE, Europe's first charitable living biobank. This is a major initiative to develop and implement innovative cryopreservation techniques, thereby enabling the preservation of live cells and cell tissues from species at risk of extinction. It's early days but Nature's SAFE are building a library of species' genetic material.

Organising committee member Francis Cosquiere closed the event with an interesting look at the topic of acclimation. As an expert keeper of snakes, who has acclimated many different wild-caught species, his personal experience may help new herpetoculturists be more successful with their animals, while also preventing unnecessary fatalities. Another example of a talk that could only be delivered by someone with a wealth of experience, the final lecture summed up the value of the event excellently.

After some closing words and thanks passed onto those that made the event happen, delegates began to wish their friends, old and new, a safe journey home. Some would fly

many miles, others would drive considerable distances and the lucky few would walk home on the sunny spring afternoon. All, however, will have gained some expert knowledge to assist their common goal of advancing herpetological husbandry.

Special thanks can be paid to Mark Hollowell, Paul Eversfield, Anna Marie-White and Jennie Shea from the British Herpetological Society, Francis Cosquiere and Stuart Priest from Advancing Herpetological Husbandry, Ricky Johnson and Emma Niemczyk from Halesowen College and Roman Astheimer from the DGHT. Together, the organising team hosted a wonderful event.