

An incidence of *Natrix natrix helvetica* observed in arboreal mating

ROBERT VAUGHAN

Yew Tree Cottage, 7 Duck Lane, Thornwood, Essex, CM16 6NE, U.K. robsindoors@aol.com

THE observation herein described only came about because a study that had been undertaken in Epping Forest since 1994 had to be halted due to 'external influences'. Unfortunately, in an effort to restore the open spaces to Epping Forest and also to encourage growth of Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), the introduction of Long Horn cattle has meant considerable disturbance to the "traditional haunts" of *Natrix natrix* within the forest and which in turn has interrupted the study situation with fewer and fewer incidents of regular groupings etc. A decision was therefore taken by the author to suspend the study in the interim (or at least until the Long Horn experiment has ended) and relocate to a lake on the Hertfordshire / Essex border that was known locally for the frequency of *Natrix natrix* sightings, so that a continued log of snake activity could be maintained.

The lake is surrounded for much of the perimeter by various shrubs and trees and for the most part is fringed with shallow banks which are covered with mosses and grasses, but, to the southern end, the weir takes the outfall to the Lee Relief Channel.

On 6th April 2007 the author visited the lake, arriving at 08:45 h. At 09:30 h, with the shade temperature at 14°C and rising (considerably warmer in the sun), a "mating ball" of around eight *Natrix natrix* were observed in a sunlit avenue between several trees. The writhing and knotting gradually increased in intensity for at least fifteen minutes before the largest of the group (female) broke free, but, it was quickly followed across the grass, then into and out of the (still chill) water and up another



Female remaining motionless after having retreated from the males (above) and before, again, being located within the tree branches (below).

steeper bank. At the ridge of the bank several trees (including willow) push out and overhang the lake at regular intervals with many branches intertwining to form a long running tangle of about 50 metres in length and 10–15 m in height.



On reaching the ridge, the female entered into the lower branches of the trees and began to climb higher and higher, not stopping until her pursuers had lost her 'scent'. There she remained motionless between twigs at a high level (at least 5–6 metres) for around half an hour (see photographs on preceding page), in which time, roughly half of the group of males had dispersed on a wider search of the lake fringes, apparently unaware that the female was above them, all the while. Gradually however, the males that remained at the scene appeared to gain an appreciation of the position and they too began to climb through the tangle, periodically stopping, retracing their movements and retracing again, while all the time, checking the whereabouts of the other males. After twenty minutes or so more (and with the female still remaining motionless) they located her and again began to entwine tails in order to force her to mate. She did not make any further attempt at retreat and the group were still in tree when the author decided to withdraw.

It is not known to the author if this action is a standard diversionary tactic used by individual females on a regular basis, as it seems that this is the first time that such an event had been witnessed in *Natrix natrix* and despite the years of study previously, such behaviour had never been noted (let alone photographed) in Epping Forest.

