
NEWS REPORTS

THE BHS REPTILE MONITORING DAY,
SURREY, U. K. - MAY 2009.

The challenge facing the organisers of this field visit was to ensure that BHS members could see all six species of British reptile in just one day. May is one of the best months to look for reptiles but the weather window has to be just right. The temperature is critical. If it's too cold they won't emerge from their shelters. If it is too warm they will either be very active or remain in their

at the Devil's Punchbowl Café near Hindhead and were soon looking for reptiles at HCT's Witley Reserve. This is a large site and is sensitively managed by the HCT for reptile populations. Fortunately the reptile weather window was operating and in just over one hour BHS members had spotted Sand Lizard (*Lacerta agilis*) (Fig. 1), Common Lizard (*Zootoca vivipara*) and Slow-worm (*Anguis fragilis*). One young herpetologist spotted a small snake disappearing into the heather (Fig. 2) which



Figure 1. Adult male sand lizard, *Lacerta agilis*. Photograph by Howard Inns.

shelters therefore making them difficult to find. Other weather variables are also important. If it is too dry and hot or windy they are very hard to find even for the experienced reptile spotter. There is also precipitation and amount of sunlight to consider. Sunshine after rain or a period of dull weather can be optimal for spotting reptiles.

As herpetologists have no power over the weather the use of refugia can also maximise the chances of seeing reptiles over more varied weather patterns as they use them to assist thermoregulation. However if temperatures under the refugia are too cold or hot they will be avoided at all costs.

Twenty BHS members and three Herpetological Conservation Trust (HCT) reserves officers met

could have been a Smooth Snake (*Coronella austriaca*).

The next reserve visited was HCT's Crooksbury reserve and by this time the early morning sunshine had given way to hazy conditions, even more conducive to spotting reptiles. HCT have created a maze of sandy paths to create egg laying sites for lizards and one specially created sandy bank offered good basking sites for several of last year's hatchlings. We found all five native species of reptile apart from the Grass Snake (*Natrix natrix helvetica*). Crooksbury obviously supports exceptional populations of sand lizards and smooth snakes, the former being originally translocated from Dorset sites during the 1970s.

A quick visit to Thursley National Nature Reserve revealed many common lizards basking on a boardwalk, seemingly quite oblivious to the people, pushchairs and bikes passing by. The group was also rewarded with the sixth reptile species seen this day, a very large female grass snake basking by the water.

It is ten years since I last visited Frensham Great pond and it was good to see the sand lizard habitat fenced off from the visitors to ‘Surrey-on-sea’.



Figure 2. Searching among lowland heathland for reptiles. Photograph by Jan Clemons.

The Natterjack Toad (*Epidalea calamita*) ponds sadly lacked natterjacks and no spawn strings were found. The reason for this could only be debated but hopefully they may have spawned after the next rain.

Our day ended with a visit to the BHS/HCT Gong Hill reserve. The site was bought by the BHS and the HCT now takes care of and manages Gong Hill with the help of its employees. The site is a veritable ‘jewel in the crown’ and shows just how effective long term heathland management can be in boosting native reptile populations. The reserve supports five reptile species (no smooth snakes here) and we were fortunate to see all five species in the late afternoon.

I am indebted to the HCT especially Mike Preston, the HCT’s Wealdon Reserves officer who planned the itinerary and in case of rain, had gone to the trouble of capturing animals prior to the day so we could see the six species anyway. With Herpetological Conservation Trust

employees Rob Free & John Gaughan and HCT Trustee Howard Inns there was no shortage of expertise to show the BHS members where to look, and how to look, for reptiles.

Finally, for members to get a good idea of the success of the field visit, I include comments from attending BHS members:

‘It was a brilliant day!’

‘I just wanted to say thank you for organising such a great day today. Please also pass on our thanks to the HCT for their knowledge, driving us around and finally for having the energy to get around all those sites in one day.’

‘I have never seen all our six species of reptiles in one day and the photographic opportunities were wonderful’

‘A most enjoyable and worthwhile day’

‘I look forward to next year’s safari!’

JAN CLEMONS (BHS CONSERVATION OFFICER)

34 Montalt Road, Cheylesmore, Coventry CV3 5LU. janice.clemons@virgin.net