

BEAM BROOK AQUATIC NURSERIES: AN UPDATE

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The introduced herptiles of the Beam Brook Aquatic Nurseries have been discussed on previous occasions. Sir Christopher Lever, in his excellent book "The Naturalized Animals of the British Isles" (Hutchinson, 1977), mentions Edible Frogs, Alpine Newts, Italian Crested Newts, European Tree Frogs, Fire-Bellied Toads and Wall Lizards as having been introduced since about 1900, by T.B. Rothwell. He regards only the first two mentioned as having established breeding colonies up to the present time. Further observations by Sir Christopher were made in BHS Bulletin No. 1, June, 1980. I should now like to add the results of two visits, in April and June, 1988, to what has already been published on the subject.

The Nurseries, established in 1903, are in Newdigate, Surrey, and supply high quality aquatic plants and fish to trade and public. Having been part of Gerrard & Haig Ltd and, later, Griffin & George, they are now under the control of Bert and Debbie Black. This couple took them over about three years ago, in a rather run-down state, just as the site was about to be bulldozed to make way for "Christmas trees". What would have been lost are 15 acres of excellent habitat including over 100 ponds, from the size of a domestic water tank upwards. The Blacks are determined to put conservation before commercial considerations and are to some extent assisted by the law preventing sale of the non-native species.

During my visits, the second of which was in the company of Dr. J.F.D. Frazer, I was able to confirm the presence of Edible Frogs. These were extremely abundant and a circuit of any well-vegetated pond produced at least a couple of "plops" every metre. Alpine Newts were more obvious in smaller, shallower, frog-free ponds and Italian Crested Newts could be found by netting deeper, weedier ponds. Three-spined sticklebacks were in many ponds and some larger ponds had goldfish and other carp, to the apparent indifference of the Edible Frogs. Italian Crested Newts were distinguished from the native Crested Newts by their more brownish dorsal coloration and orange undersides with large brown spots. A yellow dorsal stripe was indistinct in most females, represented only in the gap between dorsal and tail crests in some males, but has since proved to be vivid in newly-metamorphosed specimens.

Other herptiles present were Smooth Newts, Common Frogs, Common Toads and Grass Snakes. Terrapins (Red-Eared Sliders) and Common Lizards are said also to be present. No Palmate Newts were seen, but there is some evidence of the presence of Marbled Newts. A solitary male Tree Frog was apparently seen some years ago. Of particular interest on my first visit was a male Smooth Newt/Alpine Newt hybrid. This had the appearance, when viewed from above, of a very pale (almost yellow) Smooth Newt, with particularly distinct dark spots on the back and sides. Closer observation revealed a typical Alpine Newt crest and Smooth Newt belly. The specimen was in full breeding condition, with swollen cloacal region. The Grass Snakes seen were possibly different from typical British specimens. Dr. Frazer suggested some similarities with those from Spain. Native Crested Newts, if present, are thought to have been swamped by the Italian species.

In conclusion, then, there are flourishing and, at least for the time being, secure breeding colonies of Edible Frogs, Alpine Newts and Italian Crested Newts at the nurseries, where it is believed that they were introduced 60 or more years ago. Opinions will vary as to the desirability of such introductions but, from my own observations, the presence of Edible Frogs and Alpine Newts does not seem to have had any detrimental effect on the native species present.