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ALPINE NEWTS IN NORTH EAST ENGLAND

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This continental newt has been introduced to a number of sites in southern England where it has succeeded in establishing viable populations, often in garden ponds. This article concerns the former presence of two populations of this newt considerably further north, in Sunderland, (north-east England).

One population was established in a garden pond at NZ 383 552 shortly before the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act came into force. The introduction stock consisted of two pairs of animals, derived from a garden population in Brighton, released as an experiment to test the newts adaptability to the cool climate of the area. The pond was about 4m in area with vertical sides down to a maximum depth of 1m. It was stocked with goldfish but had thick growths of aquatic plants which provided good cover for newt larvae. This pond was surveyed in 1982 (Banks and Laverick, 1986) but the presence of the newts was not reported as at that time a colony was not properly established.

Breeding in the first season was successful with many young newts metamorphosing in late August. During the following two years only one male was found, but three years after the introduction several adults were found in the pond and breeding continued here until the spring of 1988. The pond was subsequently infilled when the property was sold and as there are no other garden ponds in the vicinity this population is likely to have become extinct.

In 1984 a totally separate population was discovered in a large concrete lined pond in the grounds of the Sunderland Polytechnic buildings more than three kilometers away at Doxford Park (NZ 375 528). This was a considerably larger pond, about 30m by 10m and again at least 1m deep. It was stream fed, but during the summer the stream dried-up and as the concrete liner was cracked the pond tended to dessicate in late summer. Like the other pond



The former breeding pond at Doxford Park with the usual complement of children with nets.

Smooth Newts were present, and there were also fish too, although in this case they were Sticklebacks which invaded the pond via the stream. Water weed, other than filamentous algae was absent. I heard of the newts via local children who went fishing there but visits in the spring of 1984 and 1985 yielded only sightings of individual animals, as the pond suffered dense algal blooms. However on a visit in August 1985 I removed a sample of 12 newt larvae from a drying puddle that contained many specimens. Ten of these later turned out to be Alpine Newts, distinguished by the blue-grey marbled colouration, immaculate yellow-orange belly and a short orange vertebral stripe on the centre of the back. I have no doubt that Alpine Newts were relatively abundant at this site.

The origin of the newts is unknown, however the demise of this colony can be reported, for I understand that the pond was infilled by 1987. As it was regularly fished by local children it is possible that there are now other local populations of this colourful newt established in the area and this may be worthwhile considering if local amphibian surveys are planned in Sunderland in the future.

It is clear that the Alpine Newt can survive the cool climate of the north-east of England, and in particular the cool summers, and this suggests that it has the potential to survive over much of lowland England although it will require more prolonged survival of breeding ponds if the species is to survive and spread elsewhere in Britain.

REFERENCE

- B. Banks and G. Laverick, (1986). Garden ponds as amphibian breeding sites in a conurbation in the north-east of England (Sunderland, Tyne and Wear). *The Herpetological Journal*, Volume 1, No 2, pp 44-50.