

A SHORT NOTE ON THE HERPETOFAUNA OF
BRITTANY'S CANAL BANKS
(OR VERGING ON DISASTER, A CAUTIONARY NOTE ON FRENCH
FAUCHAGE)

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INTRODUCTION

Brittany's geographic location as a peninsula jutting out from the north west corner of France into the cool waters of the Atlantic determines her very individual climate. Cooler and wetter in summer and considerably milder in winter than adjacent French provinces, she provides a habitat for an interesting variety of amphibians and reptiles. Although she lies beyond the range of such southern species as the Painted Frog (*Discoglossus pictus*), the Ocellated Lizard (*Lacerta lepida*), the Aspic Viper (*Vipera aspis*), and the Western Whip Snake (*Coluber viridiflavus*), several continental herptiles unknown in Britain can be found there alongside many of our more familiar species in an environment rather reminiscent of the West Wight during the 'forties. We were therefore very pleased to rent a gite this summer twelve miles south east of Dinant, situated in well wooded agricultural country very near the Canal d'Ille et Rance which runs from Rennes to the Rance estuary at St Malo. We were there from 14 July to 3 August and the weather was continuously hot with only a few dull days. When we arrived the banks of the canal were clothed in rich vegetation which provided cover for a variety of herptiles. Between the canal and the little winding river Linon which lay to the north was a strip of boggy, straggly wood, interspersed with several ponds reserved for fishermen.

As the weather was exceptionally hot, reptiles were only to be seen for just a little while after sun rise. By 9.30am BST, everything had retreated from view. Each morning we made a habit of rising about seven and slowly walking east along the south facing bank of the canal and scanning its plant cover for animals. All this came to an abrupt halt on the morning of 27 July when we were greeted by a depressing scene of absolute desolation; "Fauchage" had taken place; a gigantic articulated mowing machine had denuded every bit of vegetation over 5mm high from the whole bank along the total length of the canal. Except for one very mangled reptile corpse, there was nothing left to look at. Even the stones and pieces of wood we had used to mark spots where we had had interesting herptile sightings had disappeared completely. Nothing was seen again at what had proved to have been a very fruitful site and we were forced to look elsewhere at other sites much farther a-field.

SPECIES LIST

BUFONIDAE

Bufo bufo - One averaged sized adult found at 10 pm BST in the main street of the village of Treverien which lies on the south bank of the canal, on 30 July.

RANIDAE

Rana dalmatina - One adult seen jumping with great power through the grass that grew on the base of the south facing bank of the Ille et Rance Canal at 8.15 pm BST on 17 July. Easily distinguished from *Rana temporaria* by its very long rear legs. Another specimen was seen five days later in a village outside Ploermel in central Brittany.

Rana esculenta/lessonae - Colonies of green frogs were to be found in almost all ponds and lakes. Great variety of colour was demonstrated by the frogs; some were almost black whilst other were a brilliant pea green with varied dark markings. They were very alert because of the hot weather and very difficult to photograph.

LACERTIDAE

Lacerta vivipara - This was the only lizard species to be seen in the immediate vicinity; before the trimming of the canal verges several could be seen on the banks between sunrise and

9 am BST and also in the late evening. One very green coloured male seen and another male seen running through vegetation at the foot of the north bank of the canal after sunset (7.45 pm BST). Several immature lizards seen frequently on field edges north of the canal and River Linon.

Podarcis muralis - Only two sightings, both male and both on the cliffs west of Dinard. The first, a large well marked animal, was sunning itself in a south facing depression on the cliff below the path, 3 pm BST, on 26 July. The second sighting was at 2.10 pm on 2 August, a day that was abnormally hot by Brittany standards (circa 35 degrees Centigrade). The lizard, which was smaller than the previous one, was sheltering from the sun under an evergreen shrub of the laurel type which formed a hedge at that part of the cliff walk. Although we visited several places inland which looked promising sights for wall lizards, Dinard was the only place where we saw any. Presumably because Brittany, like the Channel Islands, forms the north westerly edge of their European range, they were only to be found in sheltered coastal locations.

COLUBRIDAE

Natrix natrix - We were rather disconcerted to find two mangled corpses (one entombed in a plastic jar) floating in the canal just after we arrived. However we were fortunate to have sightings of three very alive and very alert snakes; two males each just under a metre long on the north bank of the canal near a fishpond on the 21 and the 25 July, and a large female about 120 cm basking on a compost heap at the end of a garden on the other side of the canal on the 29 July. All three animals were seen about 9 am BST.

Coronella austriaca - The day after the verge trimming, the 28 July, I was walking across the road bridge over the River Linon about 11.15 am BST. At the north east corner of the bridge the road surface runs into the stony, *convolvulus* and *eglantine* covered north bank of the river. Here I noticed an oatmeal coloured snake with poorly defined dark markings basking almost fully exposed on a tuft of vegetation. The animal was about seventy cm long, gravid looking, with only its head hidden. The weather was close and overcast and I was surprised that so much unprotected snake was on show. Not being completely sure that it was a Smooth Snake (I wondered whether it could have been a poorly marked viper,) I pulled it gently backwards by the tail until I could see the characteristic small head with its dark triangular marking and tiny eyes. Thus reassured, I picked her up and, as she seemed both lethargic and unaggressive, tried to pose her for a photograph. However, while I was fiddling with my camera, she wound her head through the vegetation and pulled her tail free from my cautious grip and discreetly disappeared. Later that evening, about 7 pm., I returned to the bridge to find her only a yard away from the spot where I had first seen her, twined among some broken concrete blocks. This time though, inclining her head briefly upward, she slid rapidly away. We have only ever seen one other Smooth Snake, a small well marked female less than fifty cms long that we found last year in the German Husnruck. The date was the 2 August, the time 11 am BST and the weather humid and overcast, similar conditions to those prevailing at the Brittany sighting.

VIPERIDAE

Vipera berus - This was the snake most likely to be encountered on the north bank of the canal. Before the atrocious verge trimming we encountered Adders on several mornings: on the 19 July two gravid females; on the 23 July a large gravid female; a half grown red female and full grown black and white male; on the 25 July, two sightings of a large gravid female. A black Adder was also seen north of the River Linon. After the verge trimming the only sign of any reptiles that we discovered there was a badly mutilated female Adder about fifty cms long. Like the Grass Snakes the Adders were very alert, timid and fast moving, presumably due to the very hot weather.

DISCUSSION

The traditionally cultivated countryside of East Brittany, with its pattern of small fields enclosed by hedges and young trees, its oak copses, wetlands and waterways, still provides a rich habitat for an interesting variety of herptiles. In particular the banks of the canal network create a very favourable environment. Unfortunately the recent introduction of highly mechanised

verge trimming equipment is putting it all to risk, annually reducing the numbers of several species of reptiles and amphibians. Perhaps if French environmentalists were aware of our concern, a less destructive policy for canal bank maintenance might be created.

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