

A SHORT NOTE ON THE BEHAVIOUR OF *CORONELLA AUSTRIACA* ON AN ATYPICAL DORSET SITE

FRANK D. BOWLES

37 Albany Terrace, Dundee DD3 6HS

INTRODUCTION

Despite being brought up on the South of England, I had never looked for reptiles on heathlands and therefore had never seen either *Lacerta agilis*, the Sand Lizard, or *Coronella austriaca* the Smooth Snake in Britain. I decided to remedy this summer, and spent two weeks between 24 July and 7 August at Corfe Castle in the Isle of Purbeck, Dorset. I did not have a permit and thus had only limited access to such famous heathland reserves as Arne or Hartfield Moor. This being the case, I thought it would be interesting to explore the surrounding countryside in the manner that I would a less herpetologically famous land; examining the immediate environment on foot; peering into hedgebottoms; turning stones and scanning sunny banks.

The weather was generally overcast, cool and occasionally wet; what little sunshine there was occurred early in the morning, with the exception of the second last full day there, the fifth of August, which was warm and sunny with temperatures approaching 22 degrees centigrade.

INVESTIGATION

Apart from two sightings of *Lacerta vivipara* (Common Lizard) on the disused railway track running north from Corfe Castle, nothing worth noting occurred until the evening of Tuesday 27 July, when after a fruitless day trudging in a muggy drizzle, we were returning down the road from Arne. The hedgerows were soggy with rain, and the only apparent animals present were several large orange slugs, *Arion ater*. Suddenly I stopped in my tracks, for high up on the road bank was a classically coiled Smooth Snake, about 60 cm. long, glistening in the rain. She was very sluggish, and allowed me to stroke her for some time before slowly gliding away. The time was just after quarter past six. Behind the hedge was a rough uncultivated patch of common land which sloped down to the north bank of the River Corfe. I revisited the site the next evening, but only found a Slow Worm (*Anguis fragilis*) and a Common lizard.

On the Thursday I saw my very first English Sand Lizard, a female, at about 14.30 hours on a road bank near Hartfield Moor and another Slow Worm forty minutes later at the Smooth Snake site. The following day I found another large and interestingly marked female Sand Lizard on the other side of the road from the Smooth Snake site, basking in dead leaves in the bottom of a hedge which separated the road from a cow field, some considerable distance from the nearest scrap of heathery heath.

The following week, on Wednesday 4 August I again passed the *Coronella* site at about 17.45 hours. The weather was dull and warm, and there had been drizzle earlier. The Smooth Snake was there, in exactly the same place that she had been before, still very sluggish, and remained there until 16.35 hours. After first spotting her and before seeing her make her final exit, I walked a little way down the road and found a dank and muddy lane, which passed through the wooded south bank of the River Corfe. Between it and the water was a massive pile of old bricks and stones backed with brambles, hawthorn bushes and silver birches. Under a large

piece of corrugated iron I found a neatly coiled male Adder (*Vipera berus*) and under adjacent rubble were two Slow Worms and a Common Toad (*Bufo bufo*).

Coming back the following morning with the family, we found the Smooth Snake in the same place at 11.40 hours. But unlike previous sightings, presumably because the weather was fine and warm, she was very active and alert, disappearing from view with considerable speed. We then went down the lane and lifted the sheet of corrugated iron to see whether the Adder was still there. It was not but there was an adult Smooth Snake curled up with a Slow Worm. Within the next ten minutes we had spotted two more Smooth Snakes and three Adders moving around the stones. We also saw a female Sand Lizard. One of the Smooth Snakes slowly climbed up into a bramble bush and rested with its head and neck held vertically in such a way that it was perfectly camouflaged.

We returned in the evening to find the Adder back under the corrugated iron at 18.50 hours, and yet another Smooth Snake slithering around the rubble about two metres away.

DISCUSSION

Before this summer I had only ever seen two Smooth Snakes; one in Germany and one in France. When I came to Dorset I expected to see few if any, and those on the sandy heaths which is their designated habitat. Instead I saw five Smooth Snakes, one perilously exposed on a road side bank, and the other four sharing a rubble heap in a damp tree-shaded spot with Adders, Slow worms, one Toad and a Sand Lizard.

Neither of the continental *Coronella* that I saw was found on heathland; the German specimen was on a road bank beneath a field, and the French one lived in rubble on the edge of a road bridge crossing a river. Perhaps subtle changes in the climate are enabling both Smooth Snakes and Sand Lizards to leave the environmentally safe but over-crowded Dorset heathland reserves, and colonise adjacent habitats of a kind resembling those of their European counterparts. Or perhaps the stone pile was a hibernation site to which they were returning prematurely because of the unusually cold and wet summer.

REFERENCES

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