

## **A STORY FROM THE PAST: A HERPETOLOGICAL JOURNEY IN POST-WAR GERMANY BY ALFRED LEUTSCHER**

Alfred Leutscher was a founder member of the British Herpetological Society, active in its early years. His name and work will be familiar to many members. He often contributed articles to aquarist magazines. We reprint here an article of his from the now long vanished "Water Life" magazine of April, 1947. It reminds us of a Europe very different from that in which we live today.

### **LIBERATING REPTILES AND AMPHIBIA**

by Alfred Leutscher, B.Sc.

In a thousand-mile journey, taking nearly a year to cover, an animal-lover is sure to find opportunities for pursuing his hobby, even under stress of war. My travels in uniform, from Normandy to the extreme south-east corner of the British Zone, brought me in contact with many fellow hobbyists, and no small number of well-remembered pets, some in their natural homes.

It was close to the ruins of Caen, shortly on disembarking, that I encountered my first pet, a common toad of exceptional portliness, which crossed my path one late evening and, with biscuit-tin as temporary home, joined our convoy for many miles. At each halt a display of how to eat unlimited worms, given to an admiring audience, won "Old Bill" (a female, I suspect, from her size) the position of Battery mascot, which she held until her untimely death. Straying one morning, she suddenly disappeared under the tracks of a passing tank.

Our next pet, appropriately called "Froggie" an Edible Frog of exceptional size, measuring over a foot when fully stretched, came from near Lille. With his pals, he had kept a tired camp awake, and in a violent temper, the whole night, with the bedlam he created from a nearby pond. The problems of the orderly sergeant, who next morning was despatched to the watery home to "still the enemy", were solved by a local partisan, a frog-catcher in his spare time. He appeared with his twelve-foot pole, supporting a wide, circular net, which he lowered into the water, and left to settle. The catch was to be made that evening.

Returning at dusk to the pond, which had stilled at our approach, I watched my friend prepare his bait, a bunch of white feathers dangling from a willow wand. Soon, heads began to pop up, and amorous males, with vocal sacs distended, broke night, can be heard a mile away. The feather lure was sent dancing over the water and cunningly moved towards the submerged net, with the whole pond in full chase. At a given signal I hauled on the net, and thirty captives were landed, "Froggie" among them. He lived with us for many days in a water-filled petrol tin, learning at last to take food from my hand. The rest, expertly killed, their hind legs cut off and skinned, were for market. I purchased a few and later, those of us who sampled this dainty dish, fried in butter, were agreeably surprised.

Winter saw us in the V raids of Antwerp, where, in quieter moments, I cemented friendship with my host's son, an ardent aquarist and "frogman." The hobby, he told me, was as popular to many Belgians as the national sports of archery and pigeon racing. His collection included tree-frogs from the Ardennes, which lived in a fernery, a usual recess to an Antwerp living-room, and a tropical community tank, close to the ever-lit stove.

In the Spring of 1945 we moved across the Scheldt, and into Holland. In the familiar surrounding of sand-dunes, which form a natural sea-barrier to the Dutch coast, I rediscovered the sand-lizard. The nine-inch long males, resplendent in courtship dress, were a pleasure to watch; a welcome diversion from more serious work of mine-clearance.

In the coniferous belt behind the dunes, planted to restrict the movement of shifting sand, the Natterjack toad was found, very active by day as it ran over the sand tracks of our lorries, more like a mouse than a toad. After a cold spell, I discovered many sand burrows under the firs, in which these toads were safely sheltered from the biting wind.

A short leave to Amsterdam in early summer and a reunion with some relatives resulted in a visit to the Artis, or Zoo. Reptile and Amphibian stock was poor. Poison snakes, as in London, had been destroyed, larger reptiles could no longer be fed, and some, I understood, had helped to sustain a starving population during the previous winter. I left "Froggie" as an offering.

Crossing the Rhine into Germany shortly after, I knew that, whatever my reactions toward the people, I should meet sincere and keen enthusiasts in a mutual hobby. In fish breeding, at least, Germany has led the way in Europe. In a Hamburg suburb a German employee, attached to our unit, showed me his collection – five species of newt, a pair of Fire-bellied Toads, the curious olm, both Alpine and Spotted Salamanders, and a young Alligator. These, like his family, had lived underground for the most part of the previous year. He told me of Hamburg's many clubs, keen members and public shows, and when I mentioned "water life" said he had heard of our paper. I scoured the ruined city for animal shops, but could find only one, where rabbits, now a vital food commodity, had replaced a once flourishing fish and reptile trade.

The conspicuous yellow and black markings of Salamanders are referred to as warning coloration, and natural enemies learn to avoid them. The milky fluid secreted from glands in the skin is highly unpleasant and poisonous to some animals. In experiments performed with a grass snake, hedgehog and dog I found the Salamander safe from attack. Although viewed with suspicion it is quite safe to handle, but contact with the eyes and mouth should be avoided. We found both spotted and striped forms of *S. salamandra* together with gilled tadpole stages. The adults are not so aquatic as other tailed amphibians, entering water merely to produce their living young. *S. atra*, a smaller and black species, is found in Alpine districts. The limited number of young produced have lungs from birth.

Late summer, in the Hanover district, the Sand Lizard again appeared, a hundred miles from the sea, and it was a common sight for human and lizard to sunbathe together in a sandy woodland, where we lazed and swam. In the lake I found my first Alpine newt. The name seemed misleading, as we were only fifty feet up, but later, in higher districts, I was to see many more.

Towards the close of 1945 my duties took me on educational work to the University town of Göttingen, where the newly formed army college was opened. As biology instructor, I had the fullest scope to pursue my hobby, and after a bitter winter, the spring of 1946 opened on the last chapter of my journey.

Wandering through the fairyland of the Hartz mountains I accompanied the local collector on many a delightful jaunt. His work in supplying the hospitals and biological departments of the University, and Zoos at home and abroad meant a detailed knowledge of all likely haunts, and in turn we visited hidden pools, streams, thickets and heaths to collect grass-snakes, newts, frogs, toads and salamanders.

Tiny Bell-toads, the males with eggs slung on their backs, called in bell-like tones, inviting us to seek them in the dark woods, on warm evenings, with our torches. Edible frogs chorused from innumerable pools, falling each time to the feather lure, and once a Fire-bellied toad turned up beneath the bracken.

For a while the demonstration-bench in my laboratory was the show-piece of the College, but all too soon had to be dismantled, and its inmates liberated. A small selection made the one-way journey to England with me, where they have now settled down, I hope, to a long life in their new quarters.