

SCOTTISH SOLWAY NATTERJACKS – THE WAY AHEAD

A substantial opportunity for the Society

DR BOB BUSTARD

I thank John Buckley of HCT for his kind remarks (Natterjack 42) about the work I have been carrying out in discovering new Natterjack breeding populations on the Scots Solway helped by Frank Bowles. This work is a direct result of John making sure that Frank and I were invited to the Scottish Natural Heritage Natterjack Toad Recorders Meeting at Dumfries on 29th April 1998. At this meeting it became apparent that there was a tremendous conservation opportunity. I immediately accepted this challenge on behalf of the *Society*, personally initiating a population study on the important population at Powfoot village where the habitat is very fragile, being subject to extensive human interference.

With no preconceived ideas to ‘blinker’ us, we quickly began locating Natterjack breeding populations well inland from the merse. The first three of these were reported in *Natter Jack* 41 and 42. Since it is impossible to protect populations until they have been discovered, there is an **urgent** need to survey all suitable habitat. We hope to accomplish at least a large part of this over three breeding seasons.

Following these early discoveries, we have concentrated our 1998 work in this one general area – Cummertrees – because proving up many contiguous, potentially interbreeding populations will have the greatest potential conservation impact for the Natterjacks. A total of 5 new inland breeding populations have now been recorded. Throughout this work I have kept in close touch with John Buckley who has provided me with every possible assistance. In his comments John correctly states that “Habitat fragmentation, local extinctions and more widespread loss of colonies need to be avoided now.” *In practice this is a tall order which will require very careful – and well coordinated – planning if it is to succeed.*

John goes on to say that there is a need to “allocate more resources to undertake a thorough field-by-field survey, monitoring, statutory designations and management work”, but he does not suggest how this programme of work should be carried through. *Frankly, I see this as a herculean task for which those of us involved in the task totally lack resources on the required scale.* If it were to be carried through, it would require a full-time, highly-motivated field worker for several years working closely with Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). Furthermore, SNH would have to afford the fullest cooperation and give very considerable staff time to the project.

Both Frank Bowles and I carry out the present work at our own expense. Discovering new sites on the scale of our present operations is a costly and time-consuming activity (and I have very little free time). Once discovered, extensive follow-up is required if they are to be adequately conserved. This latter work would provide most worthwhile field work for those interested in the conservation of Britain’s rarest amphibian.

The whole situation is also at odds with currently-held ideas that with the establishment of the Herpetological Conservation Trust and Herpetofauna Consultants International there is no longer a conservation role for the *British Herpetological Society*.

My small foray into Scots Natterjacks, to date extending over three and a half months from end April 1998, has shown that the situation existing at the start of my work was unsatisfactory, being based on a total misunderstanding of the toad's habitat/range. That Frank Bowles and I have been able to achieve so much in such a short space of time shows how little systematic effort had been put into Natterjack conservation in this important area previously – the sole area where Natterjacks occur in Scotland – and serves to highlight what remains to be done.

I am sure that I would find similar situations if I turned my attention to other species elsewhere, indicating that there is a enormous amount of conservation work in the field of reptiles and amphibians waiting to be done.

The preliminary work that I have been able to carry out earlier this year is completely changing the face of Natterjack toad conservation in the Scottish Solway. It is totally unreasonable to expect John Buckley, an excellent field officer, and the Natterjack Toad Officer of HCT, based on the South coast, and with titular responsibility for all Natterjack populations in England, Wales, Eire and Scotland, to be able to follow up and extend this work, let alone carry out-in-depth monitoring. So this multi-faceted project involving accurate mapping of all breeding populations and their conservation, and the in-depth population monitoring of the already-known populations **and their conservation**, offers immense scope for large-scale involvement by the *Society*. As President, I will do what I can to try to bring this about. Put quite simply, the *British Herpetological Society* should take the lead role in this work of mapping and conserving the Natterjack in Scotland. There is a major role here for the BHSCC.

The significance of this work on a UK-wide basis is that I predict that it will be shown that a very substantial proportion of the **TOTAL UK** Natterjack population occurs in SW Scotland. The formerly accepted figure ranged between 10 and 20%. Furthermore, in Scotland the opportunity still exists to preserve *unfragmented metapopulations*, if these can be discovered without delay. The "Cummertrees" metapopulation is a prime example. This approach offers the best future for the UK's Natterjack toads.

Finally, the *Society's* active involvement in a regional project such as this offers the chance to bring the *Society* to a new "audience" (and potential new membership) and to involve people in SW Scotland in conservation in their local area for the first time – precisely as the BHSCC has done so successfully over the years on the South coast.

This is a brief 'position' statement; a full Natterjack article will appear in the winter *Bulletin*.

[Dr Bustard, the Society's President, also took over the Chairmanship of the Society's Conservation Committee (BHSCC) on 28th June 1998 on an interim basis – *The Editors*]