
ARTICLES

ENCOUNTERS WITH REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS IN SOUTHERN
ENGLAND DURING THE WAR YEARS, 1939-1945

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I was born and brought up for my first seven years in the suburbs of North London, and an early interest in amphibians was encouraged by my then favourite uncle, who took me catching tadpoles and newts in the Totteridge ponds. In 1938, when I was a mature seven years old, and could tell Great Crested Newts from the 'littl'uns', and frogs from toads, my father joined the Air Ministry, and we made our first of several moves around the southern half of England, to Wroxham, in Norfolk. The house was a naturalist's paradise; instead of a fence at the end of what seemed a huge garden, there was the River Bure. There were also two ponds attached which teemed with fish; Perch, Roach, Bream, and Pike. Other residents were Water Voles, frogs, and the occasional toad on shore.

It was here that I had my first important herpetological find. One afternoon I lifted up an old wooden bucket under a garden tap, and discovered a huge blackish green frog with a long narrow head, and no eye mask markings. I knew it was not a Common Frog, and years later found an almost identical animal in a photograph illustrating the Marsh Frog (*Rana ridibunda*) in Malcolm Smith's definitive work on the British Herpetofauna. After Neville Chamberlain made his sober little speech about war being declared, my father moved into RAF Mess at Coltishall; the house we rented was requisitioned; our Italian friendly neighbour interned on the Isle of Man and my mother, who had a morbid phobia about the Wermacht invading via the Norfolk Broads, fled with my two sisters and myself to Combe Martin, in North Devon. Here, for the

next few months, I started to find out about reptiles. The first species I encountered was the Slow-Worm. Walking home one afternoon from my new school, I found a very old, sluggish, tail-less male lying at the side of the footpath. I took him home and kept in a big shoe-box and fed him on slugs. However he remained extremely lethargic and, after a couple of months, died. Fired with enthusiasm about reptiles, I became so skilled at finding Slow-Worms that I tired of them and wanted to find something different, namely Common Lizards. For many days I searched in vain, despite looking for them in the kind of habitats described in my Observers' Book of British Animals. Somewhat discouraged, I abandoned reptiles for rock pools. One day, whilst rummaging around a little pool at the foot of the cliffs, I noticed some movement in a tuft of couch grass growing between the boulders just above. I stared into it, and much to my amazed delight, perceived the tiniest blackish-bronzed lizard run out onto the warm stones. It was only there for an instant before it disappeared, but the glimpse of its tiny bright eyes, and the miniaturised claws on its feet filled me with an excitement I still feel when confronted by baby lizards even to this day. From that time on lizards became my great interest. Initially, because of the rather poor illustrations in my book, I used to think that large female Common Lizards were Sand Lizards, but luckily a little museum in nearby Ilfracombe had pickled specimens of both species, and I soon recognised the difference between them. In the summer of 1940, my father was moved to Bomber Command at Naphill in Buckinghamshire, and we drove back

from Devon. We broke the journey in a village near Salisbury Plain, and that evening I was delighted to find a chalky escarpment teeming with the biggest Common Lizards I had ever seen. I caught seventeen of them and put them in a shoe box which I stored in my bedroom in the boarding house. The next morning a girl came into the room and drew the curtains. Much to her surprise (and mine!) she was showered with the lizards which had escaped in the night and sought refuge up the net curtains. We stayed in Buckinghamshire for a few months. The local common had both Slow-Worms and Common Lizards, and a nearby pond lots of Great Crested Newts. Then we moved to London in 1941, first to Muswell Hill and thence to a strange house near Hampstead Heath.

There was a little park on the edge of the heath which had ornamental ponds in it teeming with Great Crested Newts. I used to catch them by tying a worm on the end of a piece of thread. The newts would grab the worm and not let go, allowing themselves to be dragged to the shore. One day a keeper accused me of fishing, but I showed him that I had no hooks on my line and that I was 'only feeding them'. Another time I was so engrossed in my herpetological activities on the edge of a big pond that I ignored the air raid siren. Suddenly the Heath guns started to fire and shrapnel began to make fizzing splashes into the water. I ran all the way home and got punished for taking no notice of the alert. There was one very interesting pond on the Heath. It boasted some tall reeds and very shy and agile frogs with green stripes down their backs, narrow faces and no eye-masks which

jumped into the pond with a loud splash at the slightest sound. I never managed to catch one, but I am sure that they were introduced Edible Frogs (*Rana esculenta*).

My grandfather was a resident of the Isle of Wight, and he was allowed to have us children for the summer holidays, to get us away from London. The island was a restricted zone and now innocent of holiday-makers. Also, all the gamekeepers had been called up, and the now deserted countryside was bursting at the seams with wildlife! I wanted above all to catch a Grass Snake. After the usual frustrating period of seeing nothing in lots of the apparently right places, one day I took a short cut across a meadow in the grounds of Afton Manor, where I was trespassing. Suddenly I saw a large Grass Snake curled in a classic oval coil. As soon as it saw me it made off. I ran after it with great speed and after a long chase, eventually caught it. It was a male about thirty two inches long. Later on that summer I saw two Grass Snakes that had been killed in a hay field. One, a huge female, was four feet eight inches long. I saw my first Adders that year on the Isle of Wight in a little deserted patch of sunny woodland, a basking male and female.

The last thing of real interest that I found before the end of the War was at a large pond on the edge of Moor Park Golf Course. It was a young albino Grass Snake about two feet long. In colour it was pale cream with the normally dark markings a very light grey. The eyes were a beautiful red colour. Soon after this find we moved to Scotland where I saw no reptiles until 1958.

