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## NATURAL HISTORY NOTES

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*Natural History Notes* features short articles documenting original observations made of amphibians and reptiles mostly in the field. Articles should be concise and may consist of as little as two or three paragraphs, although ideally will be between 500 and 700 words. Preferred contributions should represent an observation made of a free-living animal with little human intrusion, and describe a specific aspect of natural history. Information based on a captive observation should be declared as such in the text and the precise geographical origin of the specimen stated. With few exceptions, an individual 'Note' should concern only one species, and authors are requested to choose a keyword or short phrase which best describes the nature of their observation (e.g. Diet, Reproduction). The use of photographs is encouraged, but should replace words rather than

embellish them. Contributions are accepted on the premise that they represent a previously unreported observation, and may be edited prior to acceptance. Standard format for this section is as follows:

**SCIENTIFIC NAME** (Common Name; the abbreviation NCN should be used where none is recognised): **KEYWORD**. **TEXT** (there are no constraints on how information is presented but the date, time and locality (with full map co-ordinates if possible) must be included, as should precise details on the nature of the observation with some discussion of its significance, and references to pertinent literature). If the information relates to a preserved specimen, its catalogue number and place of deposition should also be given. **REFERENCES**. Then leave a line space and close with name and address details in full.

**LACERTA AGILIS (Sand Lizard): UNUSUAL MORTALITY AT A SITE IN SOUTHEAST DORSET.** I have been monitoring egg-laying sites, mainly in the Wareham and Purbeck area, for a number of years employing passive observation. Early to mid-June is the peak egg-laying period for the Sand Lizard, *Lacerta agilis*, in southeast Dorset and at this time the females are exposed and vulnerable as they venture into open areas in search of suitable egg deposition sites (Phelps, 2000). On 8 June 2001 at Furzebrook, near Wareham, four females appeared to have selected the same patch of sand, an area measuring approximately two square metres. These females were extremely tolerant toward each other and at one stage two were observed digging just a few centimetres apart.

I returned on 10 June to find two females dead, both lying on the same patch of sand. One had been mutilated but the other seemed undamaged and both were still full of eggs. Another dead female was found at the same site the next day, and yet another at a site some five hundred metres away. Again, these were undamaged and full of eggs.

Over the next few days two more dead females were found in the general area. I was quite mystified and suspected Crows or Magpies as the probable culprits, but a predator is supposed to eat its prey! The body count rose to seven and then on 18 June, at the original site, I found a whole nest of eggs scattered over the sand. I was saddened and very puzzled. What could be doing this? The mystery was revealed the very next day, but in fact the clues to the puzzle had been there all the time. Firstly, ants; the one thing each site had in common was that all were in close proximity to ant nests. Secondly, was the presence of a very distinctive faecal deposit. But it just so happened that the culprit was caught in the act. Part of my routine during monitoring is to scan the site with binoculars before making a close approach. On this particular day I was scanning the now infamous patch of sand when I noticed that the sand was being thrown up in the air by something, and it was certainly not a Sand Lizard. As the ground sloped downwards creating a blind spot, I had to get closer.

Edging forward, I took another look through the binoculars, and just as I focused on the spot a crimson head popped up into view; it was a Green



Female Sand Lizard exposed and vulnerable while excavating nest burrow. Purbeck, Dorset, June 2001. Photograph by author.



Eggs of Sand Lizard exposed by Green Woodpecker. Purbeck, Dorset, June 2001. Photograph by author.



Female Sand Lizard killed by Green Woodpecker. Purbeck, Dorset, June 2001. Photograph by author.

Woodpecker (*Picus viridis*). As I now approached the sand patch the woodpecker flew off with that distinctive low undulating flight and at the same time uttering the even more distinctive call. The bird had been busy; the sand patch had been thoroughly worked over. I searched for lizard casualties — there were no dead lizards but in the corner of the patch a tail still twitched vigorously. At least one female had escaped.

I can only conclude that the Sand Lizards were just getting in the way of the woodpecker's normal ant-eating activities, and just one stab from the chisel-like beak would certainly be enough to kill a lizard. Earlier in the year I had found a dead male with a single wound to the throat but otherwise undamaged. It would seem that the cause of this male's demise could also be linked to the woodpecker's feeding behaviour.

The Green Woodpecker is a beautiful bird. They are common enough in the area and have always been a conspicuous part of the local fauna. I suspect that this situation is the work of one or perhaps two individual birds and I have never experienced such behaviour in all the years that I have been working in the area. With respect to the number of lizard fatalities, I felt that some sort of deterrent was highly desirable. My only solution at the time was to place canes with silver foil tied at the top, a sort of bird scarer. I did not feel that this was interfering with nature's plan too much, as this was a unique situation and there were plenty of ants elsewhere. This may well have worked, because later in the year, although it seemed unlikely at the time, two clutches hatched successfully from that sand patch. In addition, seven eggs were retrieved and four were successfully hatched and the young released on site during August 2001.

#### REFERENCE

Phelps, T. (2000). Reproductive behaviour of the Sand Lizard, *Lacerta agilis*, in southeast Dorset, with a note on habitat management. *Herpetol. Bull.* 72, 21-25.

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