



# ARAG News

## Avon Reptile & Amphibian Group



Autumn 2007

### Pondways Progress

#### Lydia Robbins

Pondways has had a successful summer after recruiting 30 volunteers from the local community in February (from more than 70 enquiries). Two training days in pond and amphibian survey techniques were held and over 80 publicly accessible ponds have been surveyed throughout Avon. There have also been six publicity events and recently a freshwater invertebrate training day for Pondways volunteers at Willsbridge Mill.

Surveyors have encountered a wide range of species including the specially protected Great Crested Newt, as well as other amphibians, many plants, unusual invertebrates, and invasive alien species. Early indications on the status of the ponds surveyed suggest a number have been neglected, are in need of management or have disappeared altogether. Surveys assessing each pond's biological quality and habitat, particularly with regard to Great Crested Newt, will be analysed with the help of BRERC through the autumn. The results will be made available to the public through a Pondways website to be launched soon. The data will also contribute to two national surveys: the National Amphibian and Reptile Recording Scheme or NARRS, run by the Herpetological Conservation Trust and the National

Pond Monitoring Network or NPMN, run by Pond Conservation.

As well as being funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Wessex Water and Bristol Water; Pondways has also received further funding from Natural England to focus on even more sites in 2008. There is an article about pond networks and pond creation in the Avon Wildlife Trust's latest edition of *Wildlife* magazine. Avon Wildlife Trust is joint-lead partner in delivery of Pondways with Avon Biodiversity Partnership's Water and Wetland Focus Group. A big thank you to everyone who has helped with the project.

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Pond Survey - Jon Martin

### Geology and Ponds

#### Nick Hudson

As part of the NARRS surveys I was allocated a grid square in the Pucklechurch area to the east of Bristol. I located several ponds and duly called at a farm to try to gain permission to survey. The farmer was most accommodating but said he thought that his ponds might be dry.

He explained that in most years his ponds retain water as, although his land is on high ground formed by the White and Blue Lias limestones, these rocks are underlain with a bed of clay which retains much of the water that naturally seeps through the limestones. Consequently, in wetter periods there is usually a larger

groundwater reservoir keeping the ponds topped up and preventing them from drying out completely.

He told me that this was not the case this year. We walked across several fields to look at a couple of ponds which had perhaps an inch or two of water left in the very deepest part.

A temporary pond presents a potentially harsh environment for its inhabitants. A period of drying will render the pond unfit for most aquatic organisms, but this can be beneficial to amphibians by keeping a pond fish free. It is the norm for a temporary pond to dry out in the summer and either fill up in the autumn or in the spring.

Generally, amphibians will have reproduced and the young hopefully metamorphosed before the pond has dried. The extended dry period in April was likely to be bad news for breeding amphibians visiting ponds such as these.

## Unexpected finds in a small pond

### Nick Hudson

Earlier in the year, BRERC surveyors had been asked to check a pond near Portishead for the presence of Great Crested Newts. This required several repeat visits to the small, rather shaded pond. The pond was fairly unexciting, but did support breeding newts (Pal-mate or Smooth) last year and there were a large number of Common Frog tadpoles this year.

On each consecutive visit the water level had dropped and the water quality had worsened to the point that on the third visit it looked and smelt positively harmful. But this didn't appear to bother the tadpoles, or the pair of Mallard that sat on the opposite side of the pond and watched us for a while.

During the search of the pond I saw something odd and unrecognisable in the water. Gently turning it over with a stick I was most surprised to find that it was a dead squid! We then found an Eel and about two dozen Limpets all in a state of some decomposition.

This bizarre collection of "pond life" probably goes some way to explain the poor water quality but provided the tadpoles with an abundant supply of food!

Although no newts were found breeding here this year it was good to see that even this little pond with its unpleasant quota of rotting marine animals, surrounded by hard surfaces and housing was home to another generation of amphibians.



Common Toad - Jon Martin

## NARRS and Grass Snakes

At the beginning of April, BRERC carried out training for the National Amphibian and Reptile Recording Scheme (NARRS) organised by the Herpetological Conservation Trust. This is a national monitoring project aimed at identifying trends in the status of all species of amphibian and reptile in the UK. Identification,

habitat requirements, survey methods and practicalities were the topics covered.

Jo Illsley of BRERC and ARAG and Iain Adderton of ARAG led the training which was attended by over twenty people.

Iain has a great selection of reptile photos - including one of his colleagues hypnotising a Grass Snake. Don't try this at home!

Photos: Iain Adderton

