The Somersetshire Fauna.

(Continued.)

BY MR. W. BAKER.

Reptiles.

THE number of British species of reptiles is very limited. Professor Bell, in his recent edition of the "History of British Reptiles," records only fourteen, and this small number is made up by the addition of several species unknown as British until of late years. Of these we can claim only ten or eleven for our Somersetshire Fauna.

Most people are averse to close acquaintance with these creatures, therefore little is generally known about them; but they are all, except the Viper or Adder, *Pelias Berus*, quite harmless, and very interesting to those persons who can observe and study them complacently. The amphibia are all easily reared in confinement from the ova, through all their changes, and in a clear and roomy glass vessel they are lively and amusing little things, and their development will furnish subjects of deep contemplation to the philosophical naturalist.

TESTUDINATA. CHELONIDAE.

The HAWK'S-BILL TURTLE, *Chelonia imbricata*, has been taken alive in the river Parret.

Professor Bell, in his "British Reptiles," says that "the single and purely accidental occurrence of a bird or a fish, within the range of our guns or our nets, had always constituted the wanderer fair game to our Faunists ; I have therefore determined to avail myself of the means thus offered me, of adding to our Fauna the Hawk's-bill Turtle and the Trunk Turtle, the two stray species which have been accidentally found on our coast." My inducements for claiming the Hawk's-bill Turtle for our Fauna of Somersetshire are irresistible ; namely, Professor Bell's example; the following letter from my departed friend, Mr. Anstice, written to me many years ago; and the interesting and very apposite observations on this subject by Sir Charles Lyell, in the second volume of his "Principles of Geology."

Mr. Anstice says : "I know the circumstance of the Turtle being caught in the river Parret. It is not very probable I think, that it was assisted hither by our trading vessels from abroad. I should think they may sometimes accompany the intertropical seed-vessels and shell-fish that are yearly brought to our channel, and to the coasts of Scotland and Ireland, by the gulf stream. I have seen the species in question on the coast of Portugal, and once, I remember, in a winter month and a gale of wind ; and why should they not, therefore, take an excursion across the Bay of Biscay occasionally in summer time?"

The following are Mr. Lyell's coincident remarks : "Turtles migrate in large droves from one part of the ocean to another, during the ovipositing season. Dr. Fleming mentions that an individual of the Hawk's-bill Turtle has been taken on one of the West Zetland islands ; and according to Sebbald, the same animal came into Orkney; another was taken in the Severn, in 1774, according to Turton."

Thus we have good authority for enriching our list with the Hawk's-bill Turtle of the Parret, which came alive into my possession.

SQUAMATA. LACERTADAE.

(SAURIA.)

VIVIPAROUS LIZARD—*Zootoca vivipara.*

This is the *Lacerta agilis* of former authors, which name seems to have been misapplied, and to have belonged to another species of this genus, which is not uncommon in the neighbourhood of Poole, in Dorsetshire, and to which it is now given. Our active little lizard is common in many parts of our county. I have seen many apparently sleeping on the sunny sides of dry hedge-row banks about Bridgwater, on Quantock and Mendip, &c. and almost always in sunshine. They are readily disturbed; are very agile, and difficult to catch. If a person's curiosity should lead him to capture one of these pretty little reptiles, he must not seize it by the tail, for it values its liberty more than this appendage, and will run away, leaving it wriggling in the hand of the captor.

SAUROPHIDIA. ANGUIDAE.

BLIND WORM or SLOW WORM—*Anguis fragilis.*

This inactive and harmless creature is common all over the county, except in marshy places. This will also part from its tail when handled roughly. Its bony structure is intermediate between the lizard and the snake.

OPHIDIA. COLUBRIDAE.

COMMON SNAKE—*Natrix torquata, Coluber Natrix.*—Linn.

This beautifully marked and harmless reptile is common. The eggs of snakes are well known, clusters of them being often dug out of manure heaps and warm banks. I have kept some of them for weeks together, opening one or two occasionally for my friends' amusement, or my own,

when the young reptiles readily crawled out of their envelope, and roved about very prettily when placed on the carpet or an unpolished table-cover. Although they were probably rather prematurely liberated, their colours and markings were nearly perfect, being only a little paler than maturer specimens. The snake is easily tamed, and brought to come daily for its food, and to notice those who are attentive to it, but will shun strangers.

OPHIDIA. VIPERADAE.

VIPER or ADDER—*Pelias Berus*, *Coluber Berus*.—Linn.

This is the only poisonous British reptile. It is common throughout our county, but not so numerous as the ringed snake. The form of the viper is not so elegantly tapered, nor are the colours so bright and lively as those of the snake. The Red Viper and the Black Viper are now considered as varieties only of the common species.

The AMPHIBIA, like the true *reptilia*, constitute a small group, which has been considered by authors a class of the order reptilia; but Professor Bell makes it a distinct class.

ANOURA. RANADAE.

COMMON FROG—*Rana temporaria.*

This is a prettily coloured and active creature, therefore less repulsive than its congeners. It abounds in early spring, the season of depositing its ova, in slowly running ditches and stagnant ponds; and in summer in moist and marshy meadows. Sometimes in early autumn, multitudes of young frogs and toads are seen migrating from the borders of their native ponds to more convenient habitations.

It has been believed that the young of the amphibia could not be developed to the perfect form in darkness; but it is has been lately proved by Higginbottom, "that absence of light has no influence in retarding their development."

ANOURA. BUFONIDAE.

The TOAD—*Rana Bufo.*—Linn. *Bufo vulgaris.*—Laurent.

This is also very common. In general opinion the Toad bears the same relation to the Frog, as the Viper does to the Snake. Its form is clumsy, its colours dull, and its movements slow; and to most persons it is disagreeable or loathsome; others who are accustomed to study these creatures, look on them not only without disgust, but with much agreeable interest.

URODELA. SALAMANDRADAE.

The WARTY NEWT or WATER EFT—*Triton cristatus.*

EVET, of Somersetshire.

This is the largest of the British Newts. It is common in ponds and ditches, from early spring to the end of summer; and in old shrubby banks, hollow trees, and rubbish, all the winter.

SMOOTH NEWT, EFT, or EVET—*Lissotriton; Lacerta aquatica.*—Linn.

This also is very common in still water in summer, and in grass banks, &c. in autumn and winter.

FRINGE-FOOTED SMOOTH NEWT.

This is also common, with habits like those of the last mentioned, and perhaps is only a more perfectly developed form of the same.

WEBB-FOOTED SMOOTH NEWT.—*Lissotriton Palmipes.*

This, the prettiest of the Newts, was first found, as British, on Clay Hill Farm, at Cannington, in our county. It has been since found near Edinburgh, and both occurrences are published in the "Zoologist," and in the second edition of Bell's "British Reptiles." I had long possessed specimens of the new British Newt, when in April, 1843, I received a note from the Dean of Westminster, who was then giving lectures on reptiles to the Ashmolean Society.

I extract the following from Dr. Buckland's characteristic note :—

"Have you ever noticed how many species of Water Newts live in your stagnant ponds? We have three near Oxford, as plentiful in ponds remote from ducks, as once the Saurians were in the mud of the nascent lias."

In reply, I informed the Dean that I had paid a good deal of attention to these creatures, and that I had a new species, which I described to him. My note was handed over to Professor Bell, and it produced an immediate communication from that gentleman, of which the following is an extract :—

"I shall be particularly glad to have some of the little Newts, as I think it exceedingly probable that it may prove to be a new species."

Without delay I sent four specimens in a letter. What a privilege to be able to send to a friend four living four-footed beasts in a post letter! These soon caused the following acknowledgment, written at Selborne, and I believe in the very house in which the universally admired "History of Selborne, by Gilbert White," was written :

"I thank you very sincerely for sending the Newts, three of which are living and in good health, in a glass globe. The species is undoubtedly distinct, and I believe undoubtedly new, not only to this country, but to science. I shall have an opportunity of figuring them before long in my second edition of the 'Reptiles.'"

"THOMAS BELL."

Soon after I received the above, I had another highly characteristic note on the subject from Dr. Buckland, from which I copy the following :—

"I am glad to find your Salamanders are new species, and that you are in communication with Mr. Bell. Your

neighbourhood, before the days of drainage, must have been a perfect paradise for such creatures, and some rare species may still survive."

"W. BUCKLAND."

In 1848, Mr. Wolley discovered this Newt near Edinburgh, and published an account of it in the "Zoologist" for July of the same year; ultimately it proved to be known on the Continent, although quite new to Britain. The second edition of the "British Reptiles" contains many particulars relating to this species, and to its capture in Somersetshire.