

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS 2009

The Reptile and Amphibian Group for Somerset (RAGS) is a specialist group of the Somerset Wildlife Trust made up of a loose association of amateur enthusiasts. It has a number of projects running at any one time. Efforts over the last few years on at least three of these may prove significant for the welfare of reptile and amphibian species in the county and certainly provided a great deal of pleasure to those involved.

Toads

Nationally, the difficulties faced by Common Toads (*Bufo bufo*) crossing busy roads to reach their breeding sites are well-publicised. In Somerset, Sheila Cook has been running an annual 'toad crossing' at Hawkshead in the Quantocks for over a decade now. With the help of dozens of local volunteers, this well-known project has prevented many hundreds of toads from being killed by cars running over them as they cross the road between their hibernation place and their breeding pond in the spring. The Hawkshead 'toad crossing' is not alone in Somerset, as Dave Boyer runs a similar scheme in Castle Cary. If readers are aware of heavy toad mortality on other spring-time road crossings, we would be interested to hear about them.

Adders

Between 2006 and 2008 RAGS members took part in a survey of Adders (*Vipera berus*) on the Quantock Hills, essentially for the 'Friends of Quantock'. The survey concentrated primarily on the high tops of the hills, where the heathland habitat appears to be excellent for this species. However, disappointingly few animals were found. The total number of Quantock Adder records held by the Somerset Environmental Records Centre is only 40, of which only a small handful are from the RAGS survey. We are now wondering whether the Adder is truly a rare species on the Quantocks, or whether our assumptions about their habitat preferences have been wrong; possibly, Adders may be concentrated in bracken habitats below the high plateau, rather than in the heather on the top, and in 2010 RAGS is intending to test this idea by conducting a survey of four areas around the 'shoulders' of the Quantocks.

Wall Lizards

Nearly a decade ago, a colony of introduced 'Wall Lizards' (*Podarcis* sp.) was discovered living near Bridgwater. Wall Lizards are big, feisty and alien,

TABLE 1: COMMON WALL LIZARD OR RUIN LIZARD: DATA FROM OBSERVATIONS OF 31 INDIVIDUALS

<i>% of animals displaying each characteristic</i>	Length up to 20cm	Belly colour has some black	Body deeper than wide	Collar rough edged
	33	60	80	40

spending their time high up on masonry rather than lurking down at the bottom as the native Viviparous Lizard (*Lacerta vivipara*) tends to do. This was the second colony of these lizards to be discovered in Somerset, but the area of habitat available to this colony is large and conditions are particularly suitable for its survival, being warm, dry and variably stony.

Initially it was assumed that the species present was the Common Wall Lizard (*Podarcis muralis*), but after several visits by RAGS members we began to think that it might be a closely related species commonly called the Ruin Lizard (*Podarcis sicula*). The Common Wall Lizard, while not native to mainland Britain, is widely distributed in northern Europe, including Jersey in the Channel Islands, and is presumably well adapted to our northern climate. However the Ruin Lizard is a more ‘southerly’ beast, occurring as a native in Italy and surrounding islands. Distinguishing between these two species is far from straightforward: RAGS members have been making visits to the colony with a ruler on a pole and a

notebook to record characters and compare them with those in the literature.

Table 1 shows some of the findings, based on observations of 31 adult individuals. To date, the results are inconclusive: the first two characteristics belong primarily to the Common Wall Lizard (*P. muralis*) while the last two belong more to the Ruin lizard (*P. sicula*). Thus, at this stage we remain unclear as to which species we are dealing with, but our observations will continue in 2010. Arnold *et al.* (1992) mention at least one introduced colony of *P. sicula* in southern England, and our Somerset colony may yet prove to be another.

Reference

Arnold, E.N., Burton, J.A., Ovenden, D.W., 1992. *A Field Guide to the Reptiles and Amphibians of Britain and Europe*, Collins.

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