

## HERPSEARCHING IN NORTHERN FRANCE

TREVOR BEEBEE

The parts of Europe closest to our own shores seem to have received relatively little attention from herpetologists, unlike the more distant and warmer southern end of France with its well-known diversity of amphibian and reptile species. Northern France should however be interesting in relation to how our English species may have come to Britain, and to the habitats they occupy in the land closest to us. Visits were made in August 1981 to the nearest bit of coastline to Britain, around Boulogne, and in May 1982 to Brittany at the other (western) end of the north French coast.

Around Boulogne green frogs seemed to be scarce, although a little way inland and south of the town we did find a pond with a few animals in it. The most interesting places were on the extensive sand dune systems which occur both north and south of Boulogne. These have large amounts of scrub (buckthorn) cover and usually rather little marram grass, so they do not look too much like typical British dunes. Other outstanding features are concrete gun emplacements and tracks (all over the place) laid down in the last war, and great numbers of used shotgun cartridges left by the equally great numbers of local hunters. Rabbits and pheasants are numerous on these dunes, and the latter may explain the scarcity of reptiles; only a very few common lizards *Lacerta vivipara* were seen during the trip despite extensive searching. The amphibian situation, though, was more interesting. The dunes had some natural "slacks", small artificial pools dug as watering places for pheasants, and in one case more ponds in the remains of an old sand quarry. Natterjack toads *Bufo calamita* were quite widespread and we also came across parsley frogs *Pelodytes punctatus* (the very northern edge of their range), common toads *Bufo bufo*, midwife toads *Alytes obstetricans*, tree frogs *Hyla arborea*, smooth and great crested newts *Triturus vulgaris* and *T. cristatus*. Midwife toads were locally very abundant on the dunes, with large tadpoles in many ponds. It was particularly interesting to find tree frog tadpoles, always in ponds partly surrounded by buckthorn in which the adults lived. The success of midwife toads and tree frogs after introduction to England becomes more understandable when it is realised they are doing so well only a few kilometres away across the Channel.

Brittany was rather different. Green frogs were widespread and abundant, and in one shallow lake (which must have been several hectares in extent) near Lorient we came across an enormous breeding colony which must have run into many thousands. The noise was like a small airport, and seven herons were feeding on the frogs as we arrived. Agile frogs *Rana dalmatina* were widespread from dunes to hilly uplands, and we came across natterjacks and midwife toads (the latter in large numbers), again on dunes, near Lorient. Unfortunately the ponds at the best site were being infilled with rubbish — these problems seem to be universal! Newts were very thin on the ground, and I only came across a few palmates *T. helveticus*) which was disappointing since marbled newts *T. marmoratus* apparently occur in Brittany. A surprising find was a large number of common toad tadpoles in a salmon river! — shoaling just behind a weir, surely a most unusual habitat.

Brittany is known as a land of gorse and broom, and it is evident that much of the countryside must once have been heathland. Very few sizeable areas of heath now remain, mainly near the coast, but those that do were of special interest because of their reputation for harbouring green lizards *Lacerta viridis*. This reputation turned out to be well justified. We first found them on a heather-covered hill sloping down to the sea on the north coast near Erquy, living in dense heather or in mixtures of heather, gorse and bracken. Later we came across them inland on similar habitat, and in long grass on rocky bits of the south Brittany coast. I only saw one green lizard on dunes, but the species certainly gives the impression of being the dominant — usually the only — lizard in most of the habitats suitable for reptiles. No common or sand lizards were seen, in habitats apparently identical to those occupied in Britain by these two species. It is indeed puzzling that sand lizards do not seem to have been recorded anywhere in northern France according to the recent (1978) distribution maps of French herpetofauna, and certainly I

have not seen them north of the Loire Valley. We did find a few wall lizards *Podarcis muralis* at coastal sites (mainly dunes), on one occasion on a wall within a few metres of the high tide line, but they were evidently not abundant even on the south coast of Brittany. Occasional grass snakes *Natrix natrix* were also found, including one exposed out in a large flat area of dunes without any cover for many metres around it.

I am sure there is a lot more to find in northern France; many of these observations are quite distant from the nearest officially reported sites in the 1978 atlas, and the whole area seems poorly recorded. Perhaps other BHS members can provide more information?