

WORKING FOR NATURE

Steven Allain*Amphibian and reptile surveys, Cambridgeshire*

All over the world devoted individuals are doing their bit by volunteering to be involved with wildlife. Jo Price meets Cambridgeshire's online amphibian and reptile records verifier.

Herpetologist Steven is on a mission to improve habitats for reptiles and amphibians.



Steven has been volunteering for the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Amphibian and Reptile Group (CPARG) for five and a half years. He will soon start his PhD on snake fungal disease in grass snakes but still finds time to survey amphibians and reptiles, organise outreach events, train new volunteers and provide wildlife advice to local people.

“Aside from monitoring a number of populations over a long period of time, our ongoing major project is to study the non-native midwife toad in Cambridge,” he explains. “My proudest moment as a volunteer was locating the population after three years of hearsay.”

Working with local residents, the herpetologist gained access to gardens to survey the species and swab individuals for chytrid disease: “Luckily none of the toads have yet tested positive but our fear is that they may pass the disease onto our native amphibians.”

Steven mainly works within Cambridge and the surrounding area: “Unfortunately, the county is pretty devoid of reptiles (except for grass snakes) but that doesn't stop us trying our best to conserve the few populations that we do have,” he says. “These animals have suffered major declines since the 1950s due to loss of habitat and intensive agricultural practices.”

The naturalist has always been passionate about cold-blooded creatures. “They are a major part of many ecosystems and provide us with a number of services, including pest control,” he explains. “We would certainly notice if they all disappeared.”

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number of improvements we made last year benefitted species like the great crested newt and common lizard.”

Aside from gaining localised recognition for his work and providing surveying equipment for CPARG, Steven has published more than 12 scientific papers on his volunteering work in the county with more to follow.

In addition to his current responsibilities, he will soon start conducting reptile surveys for the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) in Norfolk. “No matter where I find myself in the future I'll be spending some of my time helping wildlife,” he says. “We all have a moral obligation to look after the planet we have found ourselves hurtling through space on.” 📧

FIND OUT MORE CPARG: groups.arguk.org/ CPARG or visit Steven's blog at cparg.wordpress.com

Despite amphibians and reptiles being active only between February and October, the CPARG chairman is busy all year. “When they're hibernating, I'm arranging volunteer days to improve habitats in woodland, grassland and ponds for them to breed in when they emerge. A

How you can help...

Three projects you can get involved in:

HerpMapper

Create and keep records of your amphibian and reptile observations with this app (iOS and Android). herpmapper.org

ARC Trust

The Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust need help to manage their reserves, survey wildlife and educate the public. arc-trust.org/volunteering

Froglife

Inspire young people by taking part in Froglife's Green Pathways project or join a Toad Patrol. froglife.org