

# LONDON, ESSEX & HERTFORDSHIRE AMPHIBIAN AND REPTILE TRUST

Registered Charity No. 1089466

## Exotic Reptiles

## FACT SHEET No. 14

### General Information

Several species of reptiles that do not naturally occur in Britain may be encountered in the wild today, although their eggs may not always incubate successfully in our summers, depending on the species concerned. The recent trend in warm summers may allow them to establish in the future, with potentially serious implications for our native fauna.

The deliberate release of non-native or exotic species into the wild is an offence under the Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981) and is punishable by an unlimited fine. Alien species should be reported to your local Amphibian & Reptile Group because of the potential harm that they can pose to natural ecosystems.

A brief description of the appearance, distribution and ecology of the species most likely to be encountered is given below.

### **Red-eared Terrapin** (*Trachemys scripta elegans*)

This is the species of terrapin most likely to be found throughout Britain, with thousands being illegally released as they outgrow their tanks. A red stripe behind the eye gives them their common name. They are unable to breed in the wild but, as the adults are characteristically long-lived, any adverse impact on populations of their prey (aquatic invertebrate, fish, amphibians and young waterfowl) will exist for decades to come. It might only require one exceptionally hot summer in the future for successful breeding and the production of a new generation for the next 50 years.

Other species of terrapin, such as the **snapping turtle** (*Chelydra serpentina*), are capable of taking larger prey and even removing human fingers! Almost every town lake now has its terrapins and this is also true of some of our more important natural wetlands.

### **Wall Lizard** (*Podarcis muralis*)

The wall lizard is slightly larger than our native common lizard and has an extremely long tail. Males reach 20 cm and have strongly contrasting green and black stripes on the back. This lizard is expert at climbing on rubble and near vertical surfaces.

It occurs naturally on Jersey, although colonies in Dorset and on the Isle of Wight are still under investigation. Elsewhere localised introductions have been made to a number of areas. Our past, cool summers have prevented many of these colonies from persisting for long. A extant population in south

east London has existed for twenty years but this may be because the sub-species involved is from a mountainous, and therefore cool, part of Italy.

The larger **green lizard** (*Lacerta bilineata*) is well established as a native on Jersey, where the population numbers in thousands, but it has never become established on the mainland. Presumably this is because our summers are not warm enough to incubate their eggs and to allow the adults to remain active and feed sufficiently.

### **Snakes**

No exotic snake species have become well established in Britain, although a small colony of **Aesculapean snakes** (*Zamenis longissimus*) exists following escapes from the Welsh Mountain Zoo at Colwyn Bay and also in central London. A number of **dice snakes** (*Natrix tessellata*) were said to exist in the Derwent Valley in Yorkshire. An attempt to introduce grass snakes into Ireland in the nineteenth century failed as the locals killed every one within a few days.

Many exotic species are kept as pets and, as a result, a wide variety of escaped animals may be encountered. In these cases, it is essential to seek further advice.

### **Tortoises**

These animals are far less of a threat than their carnivorous terrapin cousins and they can occasionally be encountered in suburban areas where they have escaped from gardens.

After the welcomed export ban on wild specimens in the 1980s, the value of European species, such as the **spur-thighed tortoise** (*Testudo graeca*), rocketed and many a cherished pet has been "rustled" by thieves! There have even been legal cases where ownership of an individual has been disputed.

All tortoises need to be securely fenced to keep them safely in captivity and owners have a conservation duty to breed from their pets.

### **Further Information**

If in doubt about the identification of any exotic species, contact your county Amphibian & Reptile Group for further advice.