

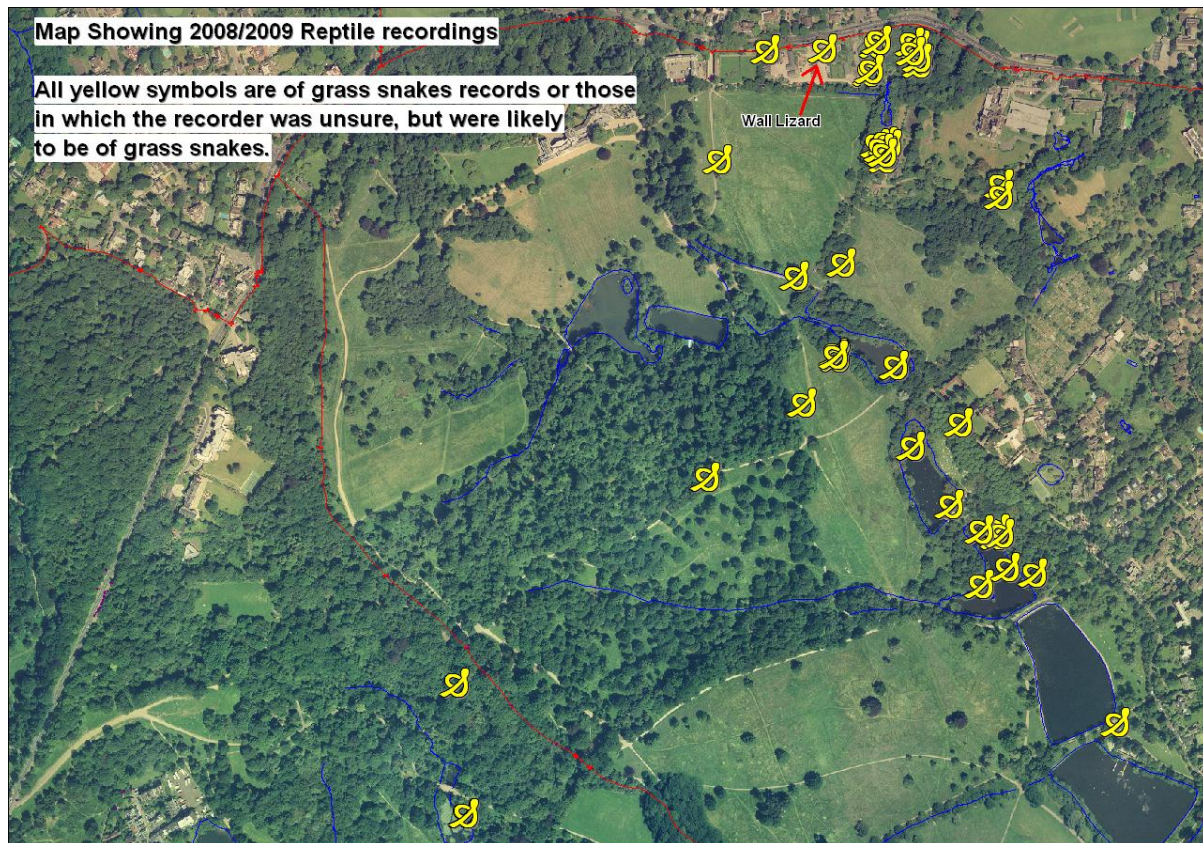
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| <b>Committee(s):</b>  | <b>Date(s):</b>        | <b>Item no.</b> |
| Hampstead Heath Consultative Committee  |                        |                 |
| <b>Subject:</b><br>Reptiles on the Heath  | <b>Public</b>          |                 |
| <b>Report of:</b><br>Superintendent, Hampstead Heath  | <b>For Information</b> |                 |
| <p><b><u>Summary</u></b></p> <p>This report reviews the status of reptiles on Hampstead Heath and recommends practical habitat management which would benefit their conservation.</p> <p><b>Recommendations</b></p> <p>That the Committee note the contents of this report.</p> |                        |                 |

### **Main Report**

#### **Background**

1. An Essential Action in Hampstead Heath's Management Plan Part I is to 'Manage the Heath to protect and enhance populations of plants and animals protected by law, identified as being Priority Species in national and local Biodiversity Action Plans, or identified in subsequent management planning as being worthy of protection.' All of the 6 native reptile species are listed as priority species in the United Kingdom Biodiversity Action Plan.
2. In 2008, the London Essex and Hertfordshire Amphibian and Reptile Trust (LEHART) were commissioned by the City of London to undertake a reptile survey. This had the aim of assessing the current status of reptiles on the Heath in order to advise on future management practices.

## Current Position



3. A survey was carried out by LEHART on Hampstead Heath from summer 2008 to spring 2009; this involved direct observation by experienced field herpetologists and the placement of artificial refugia. The survey was supplemented by recordings made by City of London staff. An online recording form was also set up on the City's website to allow members of public to input their sightings.
4. A preliminary desk study of existing records suggested that the only species of native reptile remaining on the Heath was the grass snake *Natrix natrix Helvetica*, which was the subject of re-introductions in 1981 and 1984.
5. The grass snake was the only species of native reptile found in the present survey. The presence of slowworm *Anguis fragilis* was not ruled out, however, due to its cryptic nature.
6. The population of grass snakes was found to extend from Kenwood Nursery through the main chain of the Highgate Ponds and west towards the Viaduct. The main foci were found in the fenced areas that are subject to fewer disturbances than the rest of the Heath.

7. The population is estimated to be of low status, with only 20 different individuals being recorded by LEHART during the survey. Although no methodology exists to estimate the total number of reptile species in a given area, it is reasoned that the population of grass snakes has maintained itself and spread its range since the introduction in the 1980's.
8. The population is considered to be well structured with a even mix of male and female grass snakes, as well as a varied age structure.
9. The main reason for the low numbers is considered to be a combination of human pressure restricting core snake areas to fenced compartments, a lack of small ponds for the grass snakes prey items (frogs and newts) and a lack of on-site egg laying sites.
10. A fuller report is provided in Appendix 1.

### **Recommendations**

11. Some specific recommendations are made in the full report in Appendix 1. General recommendations are given below.
12. New small ponds should be provided to boost amphibian numbers.
13. Vegetation piles should be provided to increase opportunities for egg laying.
14. Grass cutting regimes should where possible avoid clearing longer grass until late October, particularly along the grassland/scrub ecotone. Essential grassland management required in such areas should ideally be carried out on very hot days.
15. Open clearings should be made at selective pond side locations to provide basking areas for snakes at the pond edges.
16. Consideration should be given to the re-introduction of the slowworm to the restored heathland areas on West Heath. The practice of heathland restoration should continue, to provide the opportunity to reintroduce slowworms to other heath areas in the future.
17. The practice of recording reptile sightings on the Heath should continue and the public be encouraged to send in any records via the newly devised recording forms.

## **Financial and Risk Implications**

18. There are no financial and risk implications of this report; any recommended actions carried out will be undertaken using the Heath local risk budget.

## **Legal Implications**

19. The City has a legal duty under the Hampstead Heath Act 1871 to maintain the natural aspect of the Heath.

## **HR Implications**

20. The current online survey form uses SNAP survey software. As there are no Heath staff currently trained to use the software, a city employee from the environmental services department currently forwards on any records received. This may require reviewing in the future if the current employee is no longer able to provide this additional service.

## **Strategic Implications**

21. The proposals link to the theme in the Community Strategy to protect, promote and enhance our environment.
22. They also link to the Open Spaces Department Plan through the Strategic Aim to ‘adopt sustainable working practices, promote the variety of life (biodiversity) and protect the Open Spaces for the enjoyment of future generations’, and the Improvement Objective to ‘ensure that measures to promote sustainability and biodiversity are embedded in the Department’s work’.
23. These works also help fulfil an Essential Actions in the Part 1 Management Plan, namely:

*NL8 Manage the Heath to protect and enhance populations of plants and animals protected by law, identified as being Priority Species in national and local Biodiversity Action Plans, or identified in subsequent management planning as being worthy of protection.*

## **Conclusion**

24. Hampstead Heath continues to maintain a widespread population of grass snakes and as such is likely to be the closest site to the centre of London

with a significant breeding population of this species. Management recommendations are made which would enhance the breeding and feeding opportunities of this reptile.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1:** *Reptile Survey of Hampstead Heath 2008-2009*

**Contact:**

*Simon Lee*

02073323322

*simon.lee@cityoflondon.gov.uk*