



Organizing Guided Walks and Training Courses

March 2017

Background

Many Amphibian and Reptile Groups (ARGs) attend, or run educational and training sessions for ARG volunteers and the wider public. This advice note provides some suggestions for organizing such public facing events, based on the experiences of the groups.

Concerns have been expressed about animal welfare issues, where animals may be disturbed by guided walks and training sessions, and handling. In order to minimize the impact to the animals, whilst still allowing volunteers and the wider public to engage and interact with them for educational purposes, we have also included some general guidelines about this aspect.



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Guided Walks and Training Courses

Guided amphibian and reptile walks are an important part of formalized survey and training sessions aimed at volunteer surveyors and recorders; and may also be a good way of engaging the wider public with our native amphibians and reptiles.

With both public guided walks and survey and training sessions it is important to consider the following:

I. Site selection

- Site selection is critical to the success of the venture
- The welfare of the animals is paramount, and we do not recommend that you take a public group to a site containing sensitive species (i.e. adders, sand lizards, natterjack toads, smooth snakes), which has open public access. If you decide to take ARG volunteer surveyors to such a site, please ask them to voluntarily limit the number of subsequent visits to those agreed under the survey protocol, and not to tell other people about it.
- If you are able to visit a more restricted site, ensure that you have land owner permission, and that they are aware of the timings of the event and the numbers of attendees. Make it clear to participants that access is restricted, to ensure no repeat visits.
- Avoid small and vulnerable sites with low populations of sensitive species such as adders. Large robust sites with plenty of habitat are better able to withstand group visits.

- Scope out the logistics of the site and general area before the event – is there sufficient safe (and legal) car parking, and what are the public transport/ pedestrian access arrangements.
- Do a risk assessment, e.g. is there an unfenced quarry edge or uncovered mine shafts, are ponds deep or steep-sided. Can these features be avoided by taking a safer route?
- Where possible, use refuges instead of leading the public to sensitive habitat areas such as hibernacula or favoured basking spots (for adders). Inform the public that refuges on sites are for scientific surveys and constant turning and disturbance can jeopardize important data results. If they are not part of a long term study, then consider removing the refuges soon after the event (or even ask the attendees to help carry them away on the day, so they are clear that there is no benefit to returning).
- Timing is important. Avoid taking groups out during the initial adder spring hibernation emergence in late February and March. If visiting hibernacula with more experienced surveyors, aim for the end of the lying out period, when repeat visits are less likely to yield sightings. For more general walks aimed at the wider public late spring, summer or autumn are more ideal periods.
- Reduce the impact on a single site, if you have visited it with a group in the spring, then delay the next visit until autumn. Coordinate with other organizations, if for example you know the Wildlife Trust or RSPB are running guided walks at the same site try to find out when these are, or offer to partner them.

2. Publicity

- If visiting a sensitive site (as opposed to meeting at a central point e.g. offices or a main car park), then do not publicize the exact location on social or other public media ahead of the event. Once people have signed up, email them with the location, but ask them not to share it.
- Only post specific site information on closed facebook groups. Ask people not to share the details of locations on general social media.
- Even if adders or other sensitive species are likely to be present on site we recommend that you do not make this the main reason for the visit: present it as a ‘guided reptile or wildlife walk’, rather than an ‘adder safari’.

3. Before setting out:

- Before undertaking any event you should first ensure that public liability insurance and risk assessments are in place.



- Maintain a list of all attendees together with their contact details, and in case of emergency a second contact. Ask for basic medical details e.g. if a volunteer has a life-threatening allergy or if they suffer from a chronic disease, check that they are carrying medication with them.
- Are attendees correctly attired – this should be made clear in publicity materials, but if you are covering rough ground, or volunteers are likely to get cold/wet/muddy do they have old clothes and stout footwear.
- Check that footwear has been thoroughly scrubbed and disinfected before the event, to minimize biosecurity issues, particularly if this involves experienced surveyors, who may be routinely surveying ponds or other habitats.
- Are there sufficient organisers or ARG volunteers so that if an incident does occur, then the person affected can be accompanied, leaving the remainder

ARG UK Advice Note 8: Organising guided walks and training courses.

of the group with an ARG representative.

- Many ARG volunteers will not have appropriate DBS checks for working alone with minors or vulnerable adults. Therefore, if children under 16 (young people between 16-18 are allowed with a note from a parent or guardian), or vulnerable adults are present, insist that a parent or guardian accompanies them. We recommend that ARGs do not take out unaccompanied children, and if children are present, to ensure that their responsible adult stays with them at all times.

4. On the day:

- Allow time at the beginning for late arrivals, car parking and folk to change their clothes. If you are visiting ponds, provide disinfectant for those who may not have cleaned their footwear.
- Explain the features of the site, what the visit entails and how people are expected to behave. Be very clear about safety and also timings. If you tell people it will be an hour, don't keep them out for three. If people are not appropriately dressed make this clear to them at the outset, so that they can decide whether to go ahead or not.
- Clearly explain the issues of excessive disturbance (particularly to wildlife photographers) and possible outcomes of broadcasting information such as pictures of named locations within public social media e.g. facebook, twitter. Ensure this message gets across to attendees on walks.
- If you are going out at night e.g. torching, make sure that people are in pairs (at least) and that each pair has a torch. ARG organisers should be wearing hi vis jackets, so that they can be easily identified, and if walking on roadways are visible to oncoming traffic.
- At the end of the event thank everybody for coming, and hand out your contact details should they wish to follow up.

Handling wild animals

We recommend that you minimize handling of animals at public events, and encourage the value of 'in situ' photos and sightings.

However, ensuring that all of the attendees on a walk are able to spot elusive reptiles is quite hard in practice, and sometimes capturing and showing an animal is beneficial and necessary. In these cases it is important for the walk leader to determine what is most appropriate to that situation, and maintain control at all times. The general public should never be encouraged to pick up animals. Slow-worms are ideal for this, selecting an individual which has previously lost tail best. If a snake is found under a refuge it could be captured for closer examination, but limit this to one specimen on a walk and explain why you should not attempt to pick up or disturb snakes.

For training events for more experienced surveyors, if the survey protocol includes an element of capture (e.g. netting or bottle trapping, capture for biometric surveys), then ensure that ARG UK guidelines (or statutory body guidelines in the case of species handled under license) are followed. The welfare of the animal is the priority and should be respected at all times.

5. Post event:

- Biosecurity - thoroughly disinfect all field equipment that has come into contact with live animals or pond water. This could include boots or waders, pond nets and aquatic trapping equipment such as bottle-traps and canes or the box section of Dewsbury traps (for more on this refer to ARG Advice Note 4: Amphibian Disease Precautions: A Guide for UK Fieldworkers, www.arguk.org).
- Thank the landowner for allowing you to use their site for training purposes.
- If you have their contact details, contact the participants to thank them for attending, and to notify them of any future events.

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Amphibian and Reptile Groups of UK (ARG UK) is a registered charity (number 1165504)

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