



# Crocodiles of the World – Reptile Surveying of North Leigh Common.

Those local to North Leigh may have noticed small mats in various areas of the common since spring of this year. These 'refugia' sheets were put in place as part of a project set up staff at Crocodiles of the World earlier in the year to survey the reptile life at the common. By doing this, we were able to identify which species exist in the area and the habitats/areas they prefer. In the long-term, surveying projects such as this can help identify ways to manage the environment to help conserve those native reptiles within.

The survey mats have now been removed as the reptiles have retreated for hibernation, which can take place anytime from October. At North Leigh, we were still finding reptiles (and amphibians) up until November.

## Refugia surveying - how does it work?

Refugia refers to artificial refuges that can attract reptiles by absorbing heat and providing shelter from predators. They have long and successfully been used as an aid for reptile surveying. North Leigh Common is a popular dog walking area, so we wanted to make sure our chosen refugia mats were dog and child-friendly also, i.e., with no sharp edges. We chose a variety of materials including roofing felt, carpet and corrugated bitumen sheets (made from organic fibres).

## What we did

We placed 30 of these artificial refugia sheets around the common and carried out surveys twice weekly, recording all reptiles found either under, on top of, or nearby the sheets. We also recorded factors such as weather, temperatures on and under the sheets, cloud cover and time of day as these can all influence survey findings. Such factors can then let us explore activity levels (e.g. times of day they are most active, preferred temperatures) and determine if there are any seasonal movement of reptiles.





### What we found

We found plenty! Surveying showed us that North Leigh Common is absolutely teeming with wildlife! In the summer months, it wasn't uncommon to find animals under at least half of our sheets. Regular reptile residents included an abundance of slow worms, common lizards and fewer, but regular grass snakes. We were also lucky enough to uncover the occasional great crested newt not too far from their seasonal ponds. Being semi-aquatic, it's not uncommon for newts to be out of water, particularly before, or at the end of the breeding season. We carried out some pond checks by torch earlier in the year and found it was heaving with the stunning great crested newts. Common toads and frogs are also prevalent in and around the seasonal ponds towards the south of the site.



### Reptiles - Who lives where?

Slow worms showed a huge preference for a long shallow gulley just away from the grassland where vegetation was a little thicker. We'd often find multiple slow worms warming up together under one sheet. The common lizards preferred sunnier spots where the main grassland bordered the surrounding scrub. Log benches situated in these sunny areas were inundated with baby lizards throughout the summer. They favoured these benches so much that we had the pleasure of watching them grow from week to week! Grass snakes on the other hand were found a little more sporadically spread around the common but we did see one set up camp for the summer under its favourite sheet, located well away from the footpaths.







## Community Day

We also hosted a community day on the site in August once the project was well underway. The day was well received, and we had the pleasure of chatting with many local residents about what we were doing on the site. We were able to demonstrate how to survey for reptiles and we were even able to point out plenty of native reptiles in their natural environment. The confident young lizards were again a big hit, running around for all to enjoy!



## What now?

The data we've collected will allow us to produce a reptile and amphibian species list of North Leigh Common and identify preferred habitat for those more abundant reptiles. We are also interested in when the animals become active in the area, and when the season ends (when they all disappear to hibernate).

Ongoing management in the area takes place at various times of the year. This may include grass cutting and scrub management such as bracken removal. We hope to examine the effects these activities on the resident reptiles, if any. We'll then be able recommend if any adjustments need to be made to the management of the site that best suits both the wildlife, and public use of the land.

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