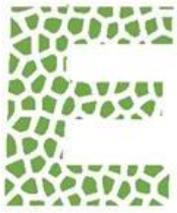


Newsletter



Happy New Year!

After a fantastic Christmas meeting, a wonderful quiz and raffle, it brings me great pleasure to wish you all a very happy New Year!

Thank you to everyone who donated food and raffle prizes, they were thoroughly enjoyed by everyone who attended and a big well done to our winning quiz team Evil Fluffy Bitey Thing as pictured below.



Thank you also to our Christmas Quizmaster Andy, to Daren for his organisation of the E.S.R.A.S raffle prizes, to Lee for preparing the food and to Dan, Michael and Lisa for setting up the hall ahead of time.

As for this coming year, in April we will be having our AGM and anyone looking to apply for a position on the committee should send an email to the E.S.R.A.S secretary, Lee at esras.uk@gmail.com or by approaching him at one of the monthly meets. All applications of interest must be made before midnight on the 2nd of March.

Invicta Arachnid Club - South East Arachnid Show (S.E.A.S)

Later on in the month, there is an insect and arachnid show at the Ashford International Hotel (Simone Weil Avenue, Ashford, Kent TN24 8UX) on Sunday the 31st of January from 11am till 5pm. This was attended by a few club members last year and a great time was had by all.

Please be aware if you would like to attend that there is a nominal door charge in order to help pay for the show's continued running.



- Beth

Bright Sparks

The Brighton Science Festival is coming up soon, and with it comes one of the highlights of our show year: Bright Sparks. Over the weekend of the 13th and 14th of February, E.S.R.A.S have been invited to return to display our animals as part of the festival at Hove Park Upper School, Nevill Road, BN3 7BN.

We would like for as many members as possible to join us in displaying our animals and educating a crowd of 2,500 people over the two days. You would be expected to arrive between 8.30am and 9.30am for set up to display until 5pm each evening.

Any help would be greatly appreciated, whether you are able to bring your animals or not as this is a big show. If you would like to help, but can only attend for one of the days then please come along for that day as we would be very thankful for your assistance.

Please remember that an E.S.R.A.S shirt is required for all show participation, and can be brought at the monthly meetings from Lisa, the committee member running all merchandise, for £5.

A big thank you to everyone who gives their time to help out at these events. Your support is invaluable to keeping these E.S.R.A.S. events going.

- Beth

The Ton Jones Interview

This month we have an interview with Clinton 'Ton' Jones, made famous by the show 'Auction Hunters' in which he bids on storage lockers with his partner Allen Haff.

Ton has a real passion for reptiles and exotics as was displayed on the show many times so I contacted him and he was more than happy to talk to me about his passion and answer some questions for us.



1. What first got you into reptile keeping?

What got me into keeping reptiles was growing up in the Mojave Desert I spent a lot of time as a child chasing reptiles and learning all about them

2. When did you get your 1st reptile and what was it?

My first reptile as a child was a Northern desert horned lizard, my father said if I can feed and care for a pet then I could have one.

So I caught one in my back yard and I had ants everywhere and plenty of dirt so I was set....lol.

3. What animals do you currently own?

I currently own around 500 reptiles everything from ball pythons (my favourite the pied ball) to retics and a few venomous.

4. What is your favourite and why?

My favourite snake is the pied ball I just like the way they look and they are a great snake to use to use in presentations they grab everyone's attention.

My favourite reptile that is not a snake is the American alligator.

5. Is there anything you don't have at the moment but would like to have in the future?

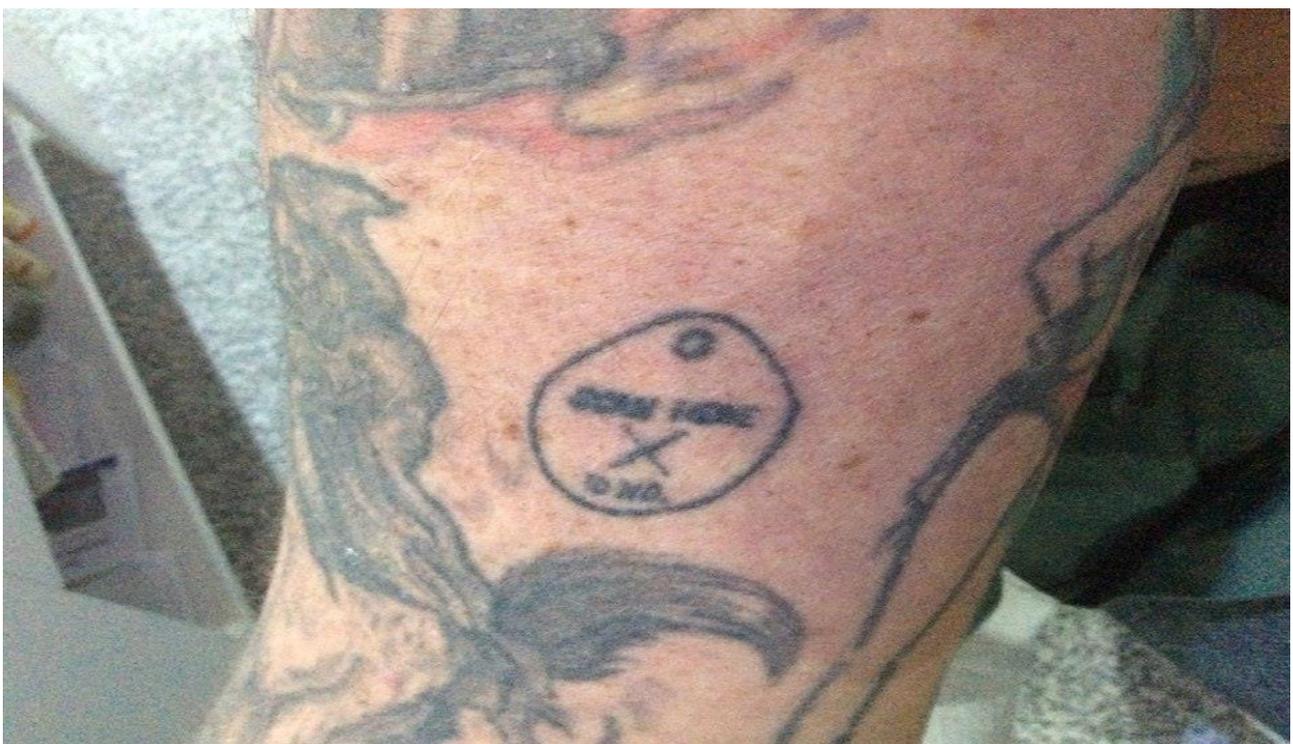
The one reptile I wish I had would be a Nile croc, but at the moment I don't have the permit or the enclosure to house one, maybe one day.

6. What do think of the current situation of reptile keeping in America and the Lacey ACT?

As for keeping reptiles in America it's a scary situation, there is a lot of people that really have no clue about reptiles other than what they have seen in scary movies trying to pass laws to keep people from owning reptiles but thanks to organizations like USARK we have a fighting chance to keep our reptiles, but if we lose the fight then soon you won't even be able to own a dog a cat or even a fish.

7. Do you have any funny stories about keeping reptiles at all?

Here is a funny story , I was 29 years old and helping a rescue organization Microchip some animals and and after a few days of tagging all kinds of animals we were finishing up an I noticed there was one microchip left over so I grabbed it cleaned a spot off on my arm stuck the needle in my arm and tagged myself and the rescue crew looked on in amazement and a few laughed ,but one person without skipping a beat scanned my arm and started inputting me into the national database , when this person was done this person showed me the computer and to my amazement I am now registered as a food aggressive American alligator...lol for my 30th birthday I got a SCAN HERE tattoo to commemorate that moment...lol



The Mark O'Shea Interview

This month I am very pleased to say we have been able to secure an interview with the world renowned and famous herpetologist Mark O'Shea. I am sure many of you know him from O'Shea's Big Adventure [O'Shea's Dangerous Reptiles] programs.

Mark was Chairman of the International Herpetological Society (IHS) from 1983–86 and its President from 2003–06. In July 2010 the IHS awarded Mark O'Shea with a life membership and fellowship for his "contributions to the Society and herpetology in general".

In September 2002 O'Shea received an honorary Doctor of Science degree from the University of Wolverhampton, for "services to herpetology".

1. What got you into reptile keeping?

In the summer of 1965 a British family arrived at the entrance to Dublin Zoo's Reptile House, and as they went in someone leaving the building said, "The keeper will get the snake out if you ask him." Inside, the keeper was just locking a large front-access cage, but when the mother asked politely, he smiled, unlocked the cage again and lifted out a large boa and draped it across her elder son's slight shoulders. "My son loves snakes" cooed the woman in gratitude.

To the nine-year old, the snake seemed huge, twice as long as he was tall, and looked extremely powerful, though in truth it was probably only around 2.0m long. This was the first time the boy had met a snake, although he had been reading about them ever since he had learned to read. The irony - that someone from a country with three native species had come to a country with no native snakes, to touch his first living snake – was lost on one so young.

Sadly nobody took a photograph of the moment that changed my life.



In fact the only photograph I have found from that day is of my mother, my brother and myself, sitting on a bench outside the Reptile House.

My brother Nic is enjoying his ice cream but I appear to have lost interest in such childish pleasures. Often today when we introduce young visitors to snakes during the VIP Tours at West Midland Safari Park, I wonder if the experience will have such a career determining effect on them as it did on me. Certainly I hear from enough undergraduates and post-graduates to suggest they have chosen their routes in life partly because of a turn of the century television series that peaked their interest, and made them say "I want to do that".

2. When did you get your 1st reptile and what was it?

Snakes always fascinated me, as far back as my memory will transport me. The books available about them when I was very young usually contained either black-and-white photographs or artist impressions of what snakes might look like, if the artist ever actually saw one. Regardless of the poor quality, I spent hours pawing over these pictures, the more general wildlife books always falling open automatically on the "snake pages" and avoiding the "spider pages", made more difficult because one alphabetically followed the other, but spiders are another story, I was arachnophobic once, but no more. After the zoo experience my interest intensified and not long afterwards I met my first wild snake, in Britain this time.

I lived in Wolverhampton and I was off school sick. As part of my recuperation my aunt offered to take me for a walk on a local beauty spot called Kinver Edge on the

Staffordshire-Worcestershire border. As I led her over the familiar trails I had tramped so many times on family weekend walks, she asked me, probably more from concern than actual interest, "There aren't any snakes here are there?"

Kinver was supposed to have a population of Northern Adders (*Vipera berus berus*) but in all my weekend wanderings I had never seen one so I said, "No." Almost on cue, there was the slithering sound of an elongate body passing over dried bracken and out of the undergrowth to our left slid a beautiful male adder. At that age I had no idea about terms like "sexually dichromatic," but I knew how to tell the sexes of Adders apart thanks to my well-thumbed copy of the Observer's Guide to Wild Animals of Britain and Ireland.

"Quick!" I shouted, "it'll get away!" Without considering the consequences my aunt was down on her hands and knees trying to corral the adder for me to catch. Fortunately we failed and it did get away. Adders are not very suitable pet snakes for small boys. Every year enthusiastic adolescent British snake hunters are bitten and have to suffer a painful few days in hospital while their parents spend an equally painful time at their bedsides. Fortunately British adder bites do not usually result in death.

In the entire 20 century only twelve people died of adder bite in Britain, the last the UK snakebite fatality occurring in southern Scotland in 1975.

In the car on the way home, my mind was in over-drive. The boa had belonged to the zoo but that adder had been wild and, to my way of thinking then, fair game. I now moved on from simply being fascinated by snakes to wanting one as a pet...though maybe not an adder!

I so wanted a snake of my own that I even planned a letter to the Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, in which I would say:

“Dear Mrs. Prime Minister: You have many pythons in India. May I have one please?”

I never sent the letter.

My mother was sympathetic to my yearning for a pet snake. She was a teacher who had her first encounter with a reptile some years before me, when a pupil brought a rubber snake to class and showed it to her at the end of the school day. She showed interest in the “toy,” wrapping it around her fingers as she spoke to him, and only then did she realize the toy was moving. Her initial instinct was to drop it, but she didn't. It had not harmed her and actually felt quite pleasant, not at all what she would have expected a snake to feel like. It turned out this was not even a snake, it was a Slow Worm (*Anguis fragilis*), the legless lizard common in English woodlands and an ideal first pet reptile. So it was my mother took me off to the town pet shop in search of a slow worm. I was banned from going to hunt for my own because slow worms lived in the same habitats as adders, and I had already proved I could not be trusted to walk away if I discovered another venomous snake.

As it turned out the pet shop had no slow worms, but they did have some Grass Snakes (*Natrix natrix helvetica*) for sale. They were then the same subspecies as we had in England, but for some reason I never discovered, the ones in the shop came from Italy. We bought one and took it home. In my opinion we had purchased the best-looking snake in the shop, if not the world. It had a livery of vivid green punctuated with black spots and a bold black and yellow neck collar. This Italian snake seemed to be a proud supporter of my local football team, the Wolverhampton Wanderers, who also sported a livery of black and old-gold.

It was not long before I discovered that snakes were the greatest of all escape artists, as my new companion managed to get out of every cage in which I placed him. I lost him under the coal-fire boiler in the kitchen and spent half the night waiting for him to emerge. I lost him under the floorboards in the bathroom and had to get my father's permission to wrench them up. I lost him here, I lost him there, but I always got him back. I decided to call my first grass snake Escapist.

Over the next few years I obtained more snakes, initially European species, including more grass snakes (never as beautiful as Escapist) and the other two related species, the Dice Snake (*Natrix tessellata tessellata*) and Viperine Watersnake (*N. maura*), as well as American gartersnakes (*Thamnophis* spp.), my favourite species being the Red-sided gartersnake (*T. sirtalis parietalis*). Throughout the early 1970s, my collection grew to include Asian water snakes, American ratsnakes, African tree snakes and, eventually South American boas and Asian pythons.

3. What animals do you currently own?

None, apart from maybe some of the specimens at the West Midland Safari Park. My King cobra ‘Sleeping Beauty’ passed away there last year, she was at least 17 and showing her age so we knew she did not have long. We had given her several extra years with a revolutionary operation to remove a tumour on her spine – see the video on my home page, but you can't do anything about age.

But I have not kept reptiles at home for 20 years or more, I've moved beyond the need to possess them, and if I had to decide wild or captive it would be a no-brainer. Because I am overseas every year, often for relatively long periods of time, I cannot keep a private collection, I don't even have a dog, but if I did start keeping a few herps again they would not be large, or venomous, or necessarily brightly coloured, because I am more interested in the secretive species with little known habits and life-styles, the burrowers, what we call fossorial species.

4. What is your favourite and why?

The King cobra has been my favourite species for a long time, not because they are highly venomous, because drop for drop the common cobras have more toxic venom, with the king it is quantity not quality that does the damage. I like kings because there is something going on behind those eyes, they seem to be 'thinking' or at least evaluating, and you can't say that about other snakes. Having kept them in captivity, worked with them in Thailand and caught them in India, they are ultra impressive beasts.

5. Is there anything you don't have at the moment but would like to have in the future?

I don't have any snakes at home.

6. Do you have any funny stories about keeping reptiles at all?

Probably but they would take too long to relate here. I've been around reptiles for 50 years, I have had some very unusual, very funny, and very dangerous experiences in those five decades.

7. What do you think of the concerted efforts being made by the anti's at the moment to stop the private keeping of reptiles and exotics?

I have no time for the antis. They are usually people driven by their own personal guilt (in the case of one well known activist) or their feelings, rather than their heads. But I don't think some reptile keepers do themselves any favours.

When the DWAA came in back in 1976 we thought it was an imposition and wrong. I don't think it is wrong now, judging by the actions of the few bad apples. What is wrong is the uneven-handed way it is managed across the UK (I made a film about that for the BBC Inside Out strand).

Reptiles are becoming increasingly popular in the private pet keeping sector and that is good because there are a lot of positives to keeping reptiles such as teaching children to care for wildlife, but some people seem to keep them for the wrong reason and any bad publicity in the media affects everyone, the many good keepers and the few bad ones.

I have thoughts on a number of topics if you want to frame questions (although I can't promise to get to them all today as I'm, working on two books and a bunch of papers and can only dip in and out of correspondence. For one book I have set myself the task of writing six species accounts a day.

Topics I have opinions on include:

DWAA and venomous snakes in captivity

Cultivars and colour morphs

Interspecific and intergeneric hybrids

7. What do you think of the antis?

I do not agree with the antis and their campaigns to bad reptile keeping. I think they are misguided, I think they do not have possession of all the facts, and I think they have a hidden agenda to simply ban British people from keeping pets. As someone who does not keep reptiles at home, nor even a dog, I can look at this objectively and I have nothing to win or lose either way.

Their statements that reptiles cannot be kept alive in captivity, cannot be bred in captivity, are patently wrong, huge numbers of reptiles are maintained for many years, even decades, and the captive breeding of many species is a common event as witnessed by the large number of cultivars and morphs that could not have come from the wild. It is wrong to confuse Animal Welfare with Animal Rights, they are two different things and anybody who keeps pets or other animals should be mindful of their welfare.

In the bad old days huge numbers of reptiles were imported from the wild, failed to thrive or even survive in the hands of people who did not know what they ate, what temperatures they required, and other aspects of their natural history. But today it is different. Sensible keepers know what sorts of reptiles they can successfully and sensibly keep. Gone are the days (hopefully) when it was a common belief that when the iguana or python got too big the zoo would take it off your hands, and be thankful. In the not so recent past a large python was found dumped in a canal in a cardboard box, there are an estimated 3000 red-ear terrapins in our lakes and rivers, and snapping turtles too, these were the result of irresponsible reptile keeping. Even further back there was a rash of large Burms being hung off bridges and set on fire. No serious reptile keeper would condone such behaviour and it is fuel for the antis.

Reptile keeping needs to police itself, weed out the few keepers who everyone a bad name and try to correct their actions. Bearded dragons make much better pets than baby green iguanas that can go from "isn't it cute" to a frightening pariah that nobody wants to go near inside three years, so get a bearded dragon for your children instead. Captive bred royal pythons are a better option than a Burm or retic that will grow, and grow, if you have children.

Today there is a big trend towards cultivars and colour morphs. I personally do not find them interesting or attractive, that is the fieldworker in me who has more interest in wild colour patterns, but I do see them as conservation in action. A double doppelganger tangerine starburst Mojave royal python could not have come from the wild, therefore keeping it does not put a strain on wild populations and the more people who want to keep colour morphs the better it is for wild royals. I doubt wild populations could sustain the popularity of the hobby today but the availability of all these odd captive-bred patterned snakes helps to remove wild populations from the market and hopefully puts exporters out of business and breeders into business.

I do not approve of hybridization, wither interspecific or intergeneric, and I do not approve of the recent interest in scaleless snakes, that is taking the captive breeding of morphs too far and is unethical in my opinion, but they are only a small part of the captive breeding of herps.

Reptile keeping is a very positive thing, it teaches children to care for wildlife. I am sure a former London mayor's desire to protect and promote green areas in London went back to his childhood passion for keeping reptiles and amphibians as pets. A person who has kept animals as pets when a child is much more likely to think ecologically when a decision-making adult, than someone with no hands on experience with wildlife.

As with any hobby there are many good keepers and a few bad apples who attract negative attention, damaging headlines, and provide fuel for people who would ban reptiles (and other animals) as pets so it is important that the reptile hobby does not get tainted by the activities of a few people who do not keep their reptiles safely, properly, for the right reasons. That is why the hobby has to look inwards at itself and police itself before it gets policed externally with input from people who would stop it altogether.

And I do think the DWAA is necessary, the keeping of more dangerous reptiles cannot be done with the same ease as the keeping of cornsnakes and royals, there has to be regulation of what dangerous species are kept, by whom and how they are kept. It is the way the DWAA is managed that has not been thought out (I filmed a BBC Inside Out documentary on this subject a few years ago). At the moment the DWAA is controlled locally with local requirements and widely differing fees. An experienced keeper might not get a license in one area while someone fresh to the hobby gets on easily somewhere else. This is clearly wrong, there should be one set of rules and if you tick all the boxes you are issued with a license, but break the rules and you lose the license and can't get another one, a bit like a Firearms license where your "suitability" is taken into strong consideration. And the fee charged should be the same across the country, sufficient to cover all expenses and administration charges, not so much it is used as a deterrent. Fairness is what is required.

Some aspects of the media and the antis like to portray reptile keepers as weird, anti-social, or cruel, but most reptile keepers are ordinary, responsible, people with ordinary jobs and ordinary lives, it just so happens they find reptiles interesting and responsible reptile keeping rewarding and fun, and long may it be so.

I myself and I am sure many others enjoyed watching the programs you made and your attitude towards education and the animals on your shows.

Thanks, OBA had two mottos by which we made the films.

One was No Setups!

I wanted to portray real fieldwork, which was my background with tropical expeditions going back to the early 1980s. I did not want to do what others do, stage captures, use captive specimens as stand-ins for wild specimens that failed to show. I wanted reality, although that word does not always mean what it is supposed to mean in TV Land. That meant we would sometimes fail to find the species we were after, and for me that was fine, that was how fieldwork worked. We failed in around 20% of the 34 OBA films but I always said to truly appreciate success you have to taste failure.

We did not even do second takes on genuine captures, it was one take or nothing.

The other was a species did not have to be Large or Dangerous to be an OBA target species, even small species were interesting (often more so) and they could make great shows. I made two films about 3inch lizards, in Trinidad one that glowed in the dark, in Papua New Guinea some that had green blood.

I set out to educate and inform and I hope I did that, certainly I still get stopped all over the world by OBA fans, which is why my FB friend list is almost full (again) and although I keep around 50 spaces free (the ceiling is 5000 and I've hit it twice) I have over 500 requests pending.

Finally, what are you working on now and are any more trips planned?

This winter I am busy writing. I am writing a much expanded 2nd edition my 1996 A Guide to the Snakes of Papua New Guinea (the 1st edition is now available for free download as a pdf from my Academia.edu site). This has involved a lot of fieldwork and also a lot of museum work requiring me to visit museums in Europe, the US and Asia to examine specimens.

I have also been commissioned to write another new book on snakes but more of that another time. It is a very exciting project.

I am also working on several scientific papers with colleagues in the US and Germany. Since 2009 we have made ten field trips to Timor-Leste in Southeast Asian, recorded around 70 species, around 25 of them new to science, so there is much to write up. And I am also working on New Guinea elapids, have described one new species and am working on some others.

Fieldwork, nothing at the moment but I hope to get back to PNG again so that I can complete the field guide. I've also been doing some fieldwork in Arabia in recent years. And of course I am Consultant Curator of Reptiles at West Midland Safari Park so if I am not overseas I will be there some of the time during 2016. One thing for sure, I am always busy.