

Account of Purley on Thames

Amphibians and Reptiles

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Introduction

This section contains information about two classes of animal life who inhabit Purley but not in so great a number as in the past. They both belong to the Phylum CHORDATA and sub-phylum VETEBRATA.

The Amphibians (Class AMPHIBIA) derived from aquatic creatures and a few species no longer retain any connection with the water. However most amphibians spend all or part of their time living in water and venture on land only for a few particular purposes.

The Reptiles (Class REPTILIA) are always air breathing but are often as much at home in the water as on land.

In each case the number of orders and species is greatly reduced from what it was in pre-historic times as many have become extinct. There remain now only three orders of Amphibians and four orders of Reptiles and of these only a few species are likely to be found in Purley.

Classification

The Amphibians are divided into three Orders

Order APODA - a single family found only in tropical regions.

Order CAUDATA - Newts and Salamanders

Order SALIENTA - Frogs and Toads

Reptiles form four orders:-

Order RHYNCHOCEPHALIA - a single species known only in the Pacific

Order CHELONIA - Tortoises, Terrapins & Turtles

Order LORICATA - Crocodiles (none found in Purley)

Order SQUAMATA - Lizards and snakes

Sub Order LACERTILIA - Lizards

SubOrder OPHIDIA - Snakes

Order CAUDATA - Newts and Salamanders

Order SALIENTA - Frogs and Toads

Tortoises, Terrapins & Turtles

It is extremely doubtful if any members of this order live in the wild in Purley, although quite a number have escaped from captivity (see section MD10). The only possible species is the European Pond Tortoise (*Emys orbicularis*) which was once common across southern England but which is now almost entirely confined to southern Europe.

Lizards

Two species of true lizard (family LACERTIDAE) are found in England but of these the **European Sand Lizard** (*L agilis*) is unlikely to be found in Purley. The other species the **Common lizard** (*L vivipara*) is quite common in the area and can often be caught basking in a warm summer sun.

especially in dry south facing slopes such as the north bank of the railway cutting where they are unlikely to be disturbed.

The other member of the order which may be found in Purley is the **slow worm** (*Anguis fragilis*) This is often mistaken for a snake as it is entirely devoid of limbs. It inhabits humid places such as thick grass and woodlands and if you try to catch it the chances are its tail will break off in your hand. If you catch it higher up the chances are it will defecate over you in fright, but it is a harmless creature with a charm of its own.

Snakes

There are thirteen families of snakes in the world and they are closely related to the lizards. Three species are native to England but many more may be found in the area, kept as pets.

The **Smooth Snake** (*Coronella austriaca*) is comparatively rare nowadays. A inhabitant of dry rocky places it is unlikely to find a congenial home in Purley. It rarely grows to more than 30 inches and is reddish in colour. It will usually try and bite you if picked up but it is not poisonous.

The most likely snake to be seen is the **Grass Snake** (*Natrix natrix*) This can often reach well over three feet in length and has been recorded up to five and a half feet. It is easily identified by its yellowish- white collar behind the head. Its colour patterns are very variable ranging from near black to white although most are greenish brown and speckled.

It is a good swimmer and can occasionally be seen swimming in the Thames. It has a wide spread of habitats, both dry and wet and can be found almost anywhere in the area. It feeds off mice, fish, frogs, newts and almost anything of a similar size it can catch.

Its size makes it somewhat intimidating but if picked up it will generally remain quite quiet, flicking its tongue at you in a friendly manner. It can give you a nasty bite but this is unlikely.

The only poisonous snake likely to be found is the **adder** or viper (*Vipera berus*). This is much smaller than the grass snake and has a distinct blackish V formation behind its head. It is usually very aggressive and will strike at the least provocation. Its bite needs immediate attention although is rarely fatal. It tends to live in heathlands and moorlands but seems to be making a come back in Berkshire in recent years.

