

Andalusian freshwater life

by José Antonio Rodríguez

When I am climbing the mountain I ask myself if it's worth it. It is four in the afternoon on a day in January. I have spent a lot of time looking for this species of amphibian. Recently I have met a herpetologist who knows a place where it can be found, but he only was able to come at this time.

My accelerated respiratory rhythm has difficulties supplying the air that my heart needs. I carry my diving gear bag like a backpack, a pack of land photographic equipment on my chest, the lead weight belt as usual, in one hand a case of underwater photography equipment and in the other a 5 litre tank.

We have to stop several times. The distance looks infinite. In the end, with plenty of patience, we reach the little lake (about 20 metres long). We leave everything on the ground and run to the edge, trying to see the aim of our quest. But we cannot see any specimens. After a couple of minutes doubt hits my mind: Are they here? I look to my guide trying to find some hope and he understands perfectly. To reassure me he says: "Don't worry, they are here". I want to believe him, sure, but I need a proof.

In the middle of these thoughts, a little sound from the lake attracts my attention. Under a small bubble on the surface, a snake-like form returns to the bottom. My friend says "Are you happy now?" Before he finishes I am running to the place where I left my equipment. Suddenly I have forgotten all my sufferings. Now, another concern catches my mind. Is the water clear enough? And the temperature? I have a normal wet suit (only 6 mm). And the depth? I am going to dive alone because the guide has taken me to this place on condition of keeping the location a secret. And finally, I only have one hour of light.

I enter the water and one of the doubts is confirmed. A headache tells me how low the temperature is and my computer shouts at me "under 7°C". My eyes seek one animal among the dense algae. At a depth of three metres, the vegetation disappears and... yes, on the sand I observe several pygmy newts (*Triturus pygmeus*).

For me, this is a very important moment. I think I am the first person who has dived with this species in its natural environment. Recently it



An Iberian newt. Nikonos V, 35mm, CU001 close up lens, Ikelite AiN flashgun





Gallipato and larvae. An Iberian newt. Nikonos V, 35mm, CU001 close up lens, Ikelite AiN flashgun

has been recognized as a new species thanks to the application of genetic techniques. It is an endemic species, with a geographic distribution restricted only to the southern half of the Iberian Peninsula. They are very shy. I have to use a lot of patience. After a while I appreciate a sexual segregation of the individuals. The light begins to say good-bye, and something similar begins to happen with the heat of my body.

A few photos later I leave the water. Well, for truth's sake, my friend pulls me out because the cold does not let me control my muscles correctly. At approximately nine we are going down the mountain dreaming of the car's heater.

When I see the images, two days later, I have the sense of having things more valuable than jewels. I have gone into an unknown world, the freshwater world, mixed with it and taken unique things from it without causing any damage, leaving it the same as it was before. Although the sea is a more diverse and rich environment, life has also spread its presence in freshwater, but this medium



American river crab. An Iberian newt. Nikonos V, 35mm, 2:1 ext tube, Ikelite AiN flashgun

has also its own variety. Lakes, rivers, reservoirs, pools, etc., are different geological accidents in which nature presents with force. Sometimes they are very near, other times they are difficult to reach.

I live in Andalusia. In this part of Spain we have problems with water. The medium rainfall is low. For instance, 2005 year was the driest year in the last decade, and the drought has not yet totally finished. But life is strong and it knows to await favorable conditions. Some years ago I visited a lake more than one hundred meters in diameter full of diverse life, from plankton to arcaic crustaceans, from gallipatos to enormous tadpoles; the last time this place had water was fifteen years earlier and this section of nature is suffering the action of man with a very big intensity.

Freshwater is being affected by man's actions with a special intensity. The pollution is transforming pristine water in contaminated veins. Last year I was kayaking several kilometres of the Genil river (in Cordoba province); I was not able to see the bottom at any time and, from time to



Freshwater snake. An Iberian newt. Nikonos V, 35mm, 2:1 ext tube, Ikelite AiN flashgun

time, the smell was putrid. Asking the people in a local village, they told me that about thirty years ago the water was clear and that they swam in the river and drank directly from it, but know it is a suicide. To gain more land for farming, people are drying historical lagoons. Near Antequera (a town in Málaga Province), a lake named Herrera, the second largest lake in the province (after the famous, for its flamingous, Fuente de Piedra lake), spread its arms receiving life under and above the water. Now this lake does not exist; but some years ago there was a period of very intense rains that collapsed the drainage system made by man and an enormous lake appeared in front of our eyes. I was diving and life had recuperated part of what it was in the past; but the dream only lasted a few months; owners repaired the artificial drainage system and the lake bled to death; despite many people asking the authorities to buy the place and protect it, nothing has been done because there are plans to use the plain for modern development (buildings, industrial zones...). In another way, deforestation is



Pygmy newt. An Iberian newt. Nikonos V, 35mm, 2:1 ext tube, Ikelite AiN flashgun

causing a very important erosion that carries tons of sand to rivers, lakes and reservoirs.

With this preoccupation for the actual situation, I proposed myself to know better the nature hidden under the surface of our masses of freshwater. This aim has taken me and some colleagues to visit beautiful places and to know species I had never heard about. I have met very interesting persons from differing spheres. Farmers, shepherds, naturalists, ecologists, scientists have all contributed to my personal enrichment. I have lived many anecdotes and now, very briefly, I want to share some of them with you.

On one occasion we went to a

little lake near the border of Málaga-Granada province. It was at the side of a path that connected several plots. The water was turbid and the bottom was muddy. We thought it was better to dive with snorkels. In a moment I heard a voice asking our attention. So, I lifted my head above the water. A man on a tractor stopped at the edge of the lake looking us in astonishment. After some seconds studying the strange creatures he said: What are you doing here? We answered that we were taking photographs of some aquatic animals. He warned us: "Be careful with the «bichas» (Spanish and contemptuous term for the snakes)". We replied: "Yes. That is just what we are looking for!". After



Fire salamander larvae eating. An Iberian newt. Nikonos V, 35mm, 1:1 ext tube, Ikelite AiN flashgun

that, he didn't speak anymore, started his tractor and went away. When I had my head under the water my mask kept filling up because my smile did not fit properly with the shape of the mask imagining the thoughts of the farmer: "They must have escaped from the psychiatric hospital".

There is another endemic species of urodelum (amphibian with tail) in the southern Iberian Peninsula, the Iberian newt (*Triturus boscai*). We asked a herpetologist where to find it. He told us that the best place was in some mountains near Huelva and that this time of the year was the best (in February!). He advised us to go to

a little lake he had visited two weeks before; the only problem was that it was in a private plot.

The next weekend we were there with the car full of photographic, underwater and camping equipment not knowing how to obtain permission to spend two days there, including the diving. When we reached the place, the owner and another man were working. We did not know how he was going to react to our request. After a very friendly dialogue, we told the owner we had come to see the newts he had in his lake. He said: "I have those beasts in my land! I think you are wrong, and I have not a lake;

what I have is a big pool". We asked him to take us to the pool. When we arrived it was 5 x 3 x 1 metres and we saw tens of Iberian newts and larvae of a peculiar subspecies of fire salamander.

The next question was more difficult: "Would you mind if we dive in your pool?" It is impossible to describe his face. I was afraid that in that moment we were to be thrown off his land. Then he said: "Yes..., if you want... But the water is very cold". An hour later I was in the very, very, very cold water.

The possibilities were so diverse that I was working for more than three hours (counting the time I had to wait for the sediment to settle), leaving the water only to change lenses and film.

Recent genetic studies have also brought to science a new specie of toad, the Betic Midwife Toad (*Alytes dickhilleni*), limited only to some zones of southern Spain. This group of toads are very curious because, after fertilization, the male carries the eggs on its back. After several years, a naturalist told me where to find a little pool with tadpoles of this species. It was a drinking trough. After reaching the place a Sunday morning, I began to prepare the photographic equipment. This time I didn't have to dive. When I was going to start the session, I heard a characteristic sound: a herd of goats came directly to my

photographic studio. I had to wait til the goats had satisfied their thirst. When they left, under the sight of the curious shepherd, I returned to the pool. The first thing was to remove the froth that floated on the surface. Trying to ignore the possible presence of bacteria and other unhealthy micro-organisms, I began to photograph the larvae.

The last anecdote I am going to talk to you about took place far away from the water. One day, Pepe, my closest friend, told me he had been asked by a friend: "Are you still doing the same foolish things?" My fellow replied with another question: "Do you like to watch documentaries of wildlife on television?" "Yes, of course", he answered. Pepe added: "Well if you like to watch them, we like to make them".

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