

SEARCH AND RESCUE MISSION

The night was sharply cold and inky dark as the intrepid explorers set off down the narrow country lane, leaving the lights of the village behind them. Owls hooted eerily and the trees that flanked their path rattled and creaked in the gusty wind. The two were on a mission; had been given a challenge which they could not refuse, despite the attractions presented by a log fire and 'Blind Date' on TV:

"The lives of these creatures – and of future generations – is in your hands. Rescue them!"

Although filled with fervour for the task in hand, the hooded figures trod warily over the uneven, unseen ground. All was murky, as the moon only showed brief glimmers through the scudding clouds and shadowing trees. They spoke in whispers behind gloved hands, careful not to alert any sharp ears that might be listening in the night – and mindful, too, not to let the state-of-the-art equipment which they carried so carefully give them away by any clanks or squeaks.

Suddenly, there was a snorting noise from close at hand. The noise was repeated loudly as the explorers froze in their tracks, almost frightened to breathe. All that was visible in the gloom was the fitful gleam of water through the trees and a faint outline of some huge presence in the field ahead of them. As their eyes grew more accustomed to the gloom, they realized that a large grey horse was contemplating them gravely from uncomfortably close quarters, snorting gently at them before shambling away. Relieved, the adventurers set off again, sweeping the lane's grassy verges with the pinpoint lights of their hooded torches: searching for the slightest movement which would denote the possible presence of those they sought.

There was no sound in the night now; the wind was stilled and nothing rewarded their gimlet gaze and ever-alert ears. Where were the elusive ones? Nearing the silver-shot stretch of dark water, they saw its surface disturbed by faint ripples and tiny splashes and noticed movement in the grasses and low-growing shrubs which formed the lake's fringe. Suddenly, as they approached their goal, they became aware of sounds all around them; the lane, formerly so eerily quiet, had become alive with movement – rustling on the verges and slapping sounds as bare feet landed on the metalled surface.

Predatory owls were poised in the branches above and lights sprayed across the sky as distant vehicles approached. Spurred into action, the patrol quickly gathered together all the travellers within reach – helping them carefully, with gloved hands, into the containers brought along for the purpose. The creatures were conveyed to the safety of the water – there to breed again and to release another generation into a hazardous world. The Toad Watch had had another successful evening!

P.A. Platt

[The 2001 patrols were successful inasmuch as no toad deaths were reported. People from in and around Ascott provide toad patrols nightly throughout March each year)