



Animal Profile: Reptiles in the UK



Adder

Scientific name: *Vipera berus*

Our only venomous snake, the shy adder can be spotted basking in the sunshine in woodland glades and on heathlands. An adder bite is a very rare occurrence, and can be painful, but is almost never fatal.

Species information

Category

Reptiles

Statistics

Length: 60–80cm

Weight: 50–100g

Average lifespan: up to 15 years

Conservation status

Protected in the UK under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981. Priority Species under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework.

When to see

March to October

About

The adder is a relatively small, stocky snake that prefers woodland, heathland and moorland habitats. It hunts lizards and small mammals, as well as ground-nesting birds, such as skylark and meadow pipit. In spring, male adders perform a 'dance' during which they duel to fend off competition to mate. Females incubate the eggs internally, 'giving birth' to three to twenty live young. Adders hibernate from October, emerging in the first warm days of March, which is the easiest time of year to find them basking on a log or under a warm rock.

How to identify

The adder is a greyish snake, with a dark and very distinct zig-zag pattern down its back, and a red eye. Males tend to be more silvery-grey in colour, while females are more light or reddish-brown. Black (melanistic) forms are sometimes spotted.

Distribution

Found across the country, except for the Isles of Scilly, the Channel Islands, Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man.

Habitats

Grassland

Heathland and moorland

Coastal

Woodland

Did you know?

The adder is the UK's only venomous snake, but its poison is generally of little danger to humans: an adder bite can be very painful and cause a nasty inflammation, but is really only dangerous to the very young, ill or old. If bitten, medical attention should be sought immediately, however. Adders are secretive animals and prefer to slither off into the undergrowth than confront and bite humans and domestic animals; most attacks happen when they are trodden on or picked up. Instead, they use their venom to immobilise and kill their prey of small mammals, nestlings and lizards.

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Grass snake

Scientific name: *Natrix helvetica*

The grass snake is our longest snake, but don't worry if you find one in the compost heap - it's harmless! Look out for this green and yellow beauty in grasslands and wetlands, too.

Species information

Category

Reptiles

Statistics

Length: 90-150cm

Weight: 240g

Average lifespan: 15-25 years

Conservation status

Protected in the UK under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981. Priority Species under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework.

When to see

April to October

About

Our largest snake, the grass snake, is particularly fond of wetland habitats, but can also be found in dry grasslands and in gardens, especially those with a pond nearby. During the summer, grass snake can be spotted basking in the sun near their favourite ponds or swimming in the water.

They hunt amphibians, fish, small mammals and birds. Females lay 10 to 40 eggs in rotting vegetation, such as compost heaps, incubating them until they hatch in early Autumn.

Like all reptiles, grass snake hibernate, usually from October to April.

Note

The British population of grass snake belongs to the distinct subspecies *Natrix natrix helvetica*, but new research published in August 2017 proposed that it should be elevated to full species status, with the name barred grass snake, *Natrix helvetica*.

How to identify

The grass snake is usually greenish in colour, with a yellow and black collar, pale belly, and dark markings down the sides. Females are bigger than males.

Distribution

Widespread in England and Wales, but absent from Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Isles of Scilly and most of the Channel Islands.

Habitats

Grassland

Heathland and moorland

Freshwater

Farmland

Wetlands

Woodland

Did you know?

When threatened by one of its many predators, the grass snake often 'plays dead', perhaps making itself less appealing to eat. Predators include badgers, red foxes, domestic cats, hedgehogs and a number of birds; when caught, grass snakes hiss and release a foul-smelling substance from their anal gland. Although they may also strike with the head, they do not bite and are harmless to humans.

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Smooth snake

Scientific name: *Coronella austriaca*

The rare smooth snake can only be found at a few heathland sites in the UK. It looks a bit like an adder, but lacks the distinctive zig-zag pattern along its back.

Species information

Category

Reptiles

Statistics

Length: 50–70cm

Weight: 100g

Average lifespan: up to 20 years

Conservation status

Protected in the UK under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981. Priority Species under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework. Listed as a European Protected Species under Annex IV of the European Habitats Directive.

When to see

April to October

About

The rare smooth snake can only be found in a few places, often alongside the rare sand lizard because they both favour the same kind of sandy heathland habitat. As with other reptiles, smooth snakes are cold-blooded, so bask in the sun during the day and hibernate from October to April when they would struggle to warm up enough to be active and hunt. In spring, males compete to win females who incubate their eggs internally and 'give birth' to 4 to 15 young in September.

How to identify

Similar in appearance to the adder, the smooth snake can be distinguished by its more slender body, round pupil and less well-formed dark pattern on its back. It is usually grey or dark brown in colour.

Distribution

Very rare, confined to sandy heaths in Dorset, Hampshire and Surrey; reintroduced populations exist in West Sussex and Devon.

Habitats

Heathland and moorland

Did you know?

The smooth snake is a constrictor, coiling up around its prey to subdue it and often crush it to death. Harmless to humans, this snake preys on sand lizards, slow-worms, insects and nestlings. Despite its superb camouflage, the smooth snake does have predators: birds, such as pheasants, carrion crows and birds of prey, and mammals, such as red foxes, badgers and weasels. When caught, the smooth snake will strike, but its bite is not venomous, so this is just a deterrent.

How people can help

The Wildlife Trusts are working to restore and protect our heathlands by promoting good management, clearing encroaching scrub and implementing beneficial grazing regimes. This work is vital if these habitats are to survive; you can help by supporting your local Wildlife Trust and becoming a member or volunteer.

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Slow worm

Scientific name: *Anguis fragilis*

Despite appearances, the slow worm is actually a legless lizard, not a worm or a snake! Look out for it basking in the sun on heathlands and grasslands, or even in the garden, where it favours compost heaps.

Species information

Category

Reptiles

Statistics

Length: 40-50cm

Weight: 20-100g

Average lifespan: up to 20 years

Conservation status

Protected in the UK under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981. Priority Species under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework.

When to see

March to October

About

The slow worm is neither a worm nor a snake, but is, in fact, a legless lizard – its identity is given away by its abilities to shed its tail and blink with its eyelids.

Slow worms can be found in heathland, tussocky grassland, woodland edges and rides where they can find invertebrates to eat and a sunny patch in which to sunbathe. They are often found in mature gardens and allotments, where they like hunting around the compost heap. However, if you have a cat, you are unlikely to find them in your garden as cats predate them. Like other reptiles, slow worms hibernate, usually from October to March.

How to identify

The slow worm is much smaller than a snake and has smooth, golden-grey skin. Males are paler in colour and sometimes sport blue spots, while females are larger, with dark sides and a dark stripe down the back.

Distribution

Found throughout the country, except for most Scottish islands, Northern Ireland and most of the Channel Islands.

Habitats

Grassland

Heathland and moorland

Woodland

Did you know?

The mating season for slow worms kicks off in May and males become aggressive towards each other. During courtship, the male takes hold of the female by biting her head or neck, and they intertwine their bodies. Courtship may last for as long as 10 hours! Females incubate the eggs internally, 'giving birth' to an average of eight young in summer.



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Common lizard

Scientific name: *Zootoca vivipara*

Look out for a common lizard basking in the warm sun as you wander around heathlands, moorlands and grasslands. You might even be lucky enough to spot one in your garden, too!

Species information

Category

Reptiles

Statistics

Length: 10-15cm

Average lifespan: 5-6 years

Conservation status

Protected in the UK under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981. Priority Species under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework.

When to see

March to October

About

Living up to its name, the common lizard is the UK's most common and widespread reptile; it is the only reptile native to Ireland. It is found across many habitats, including heathland, moorland, woodland and grassland, where it can be seen basking in sunny spots. Also known as the 'viviparous lizard', the common lizard is unusual among reptiles as it incubates its eggs inside its body and 'gives birth' to live young rather than laying eggs. Adults emerge from hibernation in spring, mating in April and May, and producing three to eleven young in July.

How to identify

The common lizard is variable in colour, but is usually brownish-grey, often with rows of darker spots or stripes down the back and sides. Males have bright yellow or orange undersides with spots, while females have paler, plain bellies.

Distribution

Found throughout the country, except for most Scottish islands, the Isles of Scilly and the Channel Islands. The only reptile native to Ireland.

Habitats

Grassland

Heathland and moorland

Coastal

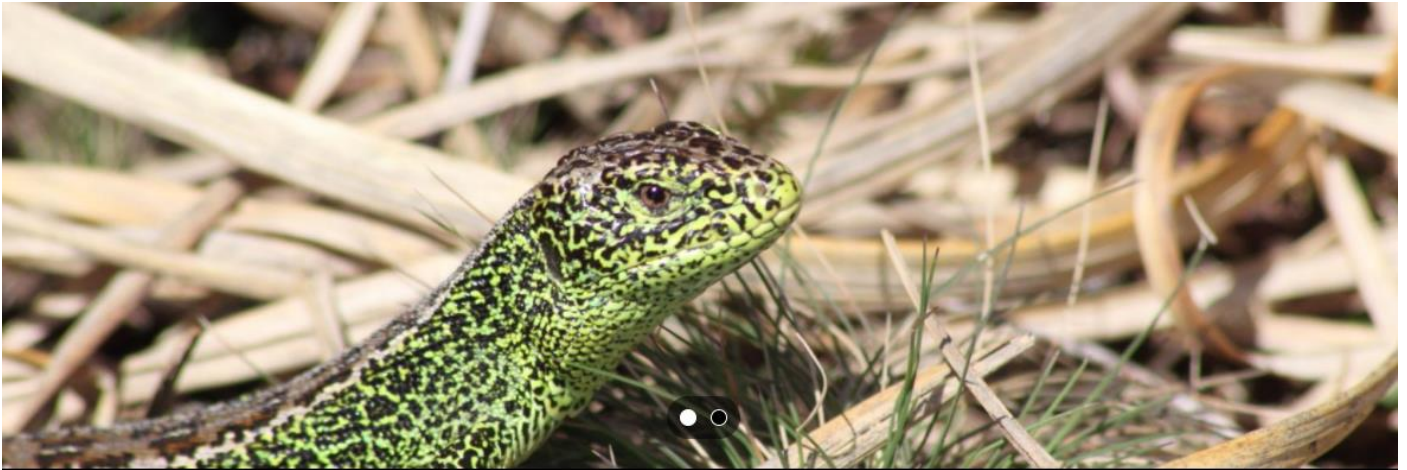
Woodland

Did you know?

If threatened by a predator, the common lizard will shed its still-moving tail in order to distract its attacker and make a quick getaway. This leaves a scar behind, but it can regrow its tail, although it is usually shorter than the original.



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Sand lizard

Scientific name: *Lacerta agilis*

The sand lizard is extremely rare due to the loss of its sandy heath and dune habitats. Reintroduction programmes have helped establish new populations.

Species information

Category

Reptiles

Statistics

Length: 20cm

Weight: 15g

Average lifespan: up to 20 years

Conservation status

Protected in the UK under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981. Priority Species under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework. Listed as a European Protected Species under Annex IV of the European Habitats Directive.

When to see

April to October

About

The sand lizard is one of the UK's rarest reptiles. It favours sandy heathland habitats and sand dunes, and can be spotted basking on bare patches of sand. Sand lizards are confined to a few sites as destruction of their habitat has reduced their range. Males emerge from hibernation in spring, turning a bright green colour as they get ready to mate. Females lay their eggs in the sand in June and July, and the young hatch one to two months later.

How to identify

Female sand lizards are a sandy-brown colour, with rows of dark blotches along the back; males have green flanks that are at their brightest during the breeding season, making them easy to spot.

Distribution

Restricted to a few isolated areas in Dorset, Hampshire, Surrey and Merseyside. Reintroduced into other areas in the South East, South West and Wales.

Habitats

Heathland and moorland

Coastal

Did you know?

The sand lizard digs burrows for shelter, both for night-time refuge and for hibernation. Burrows can be as deep as one metre, but tend to be small in diameter. Dug out of sandy soil, the entrance is usually hidden in the undergrowth and turns sharply after just a few centimetres so that the lizard is concealed when inside. Sometimes, sand lizards dig their own hibernation burrow within the walls of a rabbit warren.