

Carillion plc Environmental Tool Box Talk – Pg 1



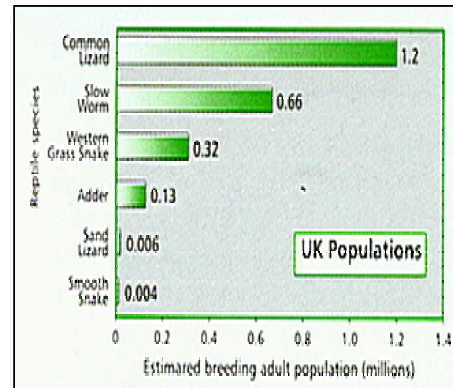
The identification of snakes in the UK.



Introduction

There are three main species of snake in the UK, the Smooth Snake (*Coronella austriaca*), the Grass Snake (*Natrix natrix*) & the Adder (*Vipera Berus*). The populations of all these snakes are low & declining compared to other UK reptiles. Their habitat often clashes with areas of development.

Snakes in the UK are unnecessarily associated with danger. The only UK snake that poses a risk is the Adder & even this is only minor. The focus needs to be on protecting the snake.



Factors causing loss or decline.

Generally:

- Natural encroachment into the heathland habitat by birch, pine, bracken and other scrub.
- Uncontrolled fires can also destroy their habitat.
- Direct persecution and collection (e.g. as pets) impacts on local populations.

Related to the construction industry:

- The deterioration, fragmentation & in some cases complete loss of their habitat due to development, forestry and mineral extraction. Heathland is particularly vulnerable to these competing uses & pressures.



Legislation

All species of snake are protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Therefore it is **illegal** to intentionally kill, injure, handle or sell them.

The Smooth Snake has **endangered** status and is further protected by British and European law.

If a snake population is suspected on site it should be left alone and the correct authorities should be contacted.

Safety

The Adder is the only venomous snake in the UK. Although it is not aggressive there is a risk that it could bite a human.

This is not serious (unless young, elderly or infirm) **BUT** in all cases immediate medical attention is necessary.

Contacts

Site Environmental Co-ordinator or Environmental Advisor.

Local Wildlife Trust should be able to confirm snake populations in your local area.

HQ: The Kiln, Mather Road, Newark, Nottinghamshire, NG24 1WT (Tel 0870 036 7711)

English Nature, Northminster House, Peterborough, PE1 1UA (Tel 01733 455000)

Countryside Council for Wales, Plas Penrhos, Fford Penrhos, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 5LQ
(Tel 01284 370444)

Scottish National Heritage, 12 Hope Terrace, Edinburgh, EH9 2AS (Tel 0131 47774784)

Environment and Heritage Services (Northern Ireland), Environment Services, Commonwealth House, 35 Castle Street, Belfast, BT1 1GH (Tel 028 9025 4754)

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The Smooth Snake (*Coronella austrica*)



- Approx. 60cm long, slender, with a triangular shaped head & no narrowing of the head.
- Female: uniform brown-grey, regular pattern of pale black spots, head has a darker heart-shaped marking.
- Male: Similar pattern, often paler against a dark background.

The Grass Snake (*Natrix natrix*)



Description:

- Grows to +1m & can be as thick as your wrist.
- Light to medium olive green colour, usually with a pattern of small black blotches along their side. Underneath they are cream with a chessboard of black rectangles.
- Distinguishing feature is the yellow & black 'collar' markings behind its head.

The Adder (*Vipera Berus*)



- It is relatively short & robust, showing a clear 'v' or 'x' marking on the top of its head.
- Males are cream/light grey with a zigzag in jet-black, can grow to approx. 60cm.
- Females are sandy brown with a zigzag pattern in a dark tan and dark brick red, can grow to approx. 75cm.

Habitat:

- Lowland heath areas, with access to water or marsh areas.
- Dry slopes & south-facing banks preferred, especially mature heath with good cover & soft soils for burrowing.

- Prefer damp areas with long grass, near marsh & wetland areas.
- Woodland & drier areas, especially close to cover such as bramble patches.
- Will use concrete and tarmac areas for basking.

- Heathland areas, especially where heather is the dominant plant.
- Move into woodland and wetland areas in the warmer months where they forage.

Behaviour:

- Hibernate October – March.
- Extremely secretive and cautious, spending most of their time underground.
- They will not attack humans but will retreat as soon as vibrations are felt from nearby ground.

- Hibernate October – March.
- Strong swimmers so can often be seen in ponds & rivers.
- Defensive techniques include (convincingly) playing dead, hissing and the discharge of foul smelling gastric juices.
- Their venom is harmless to humans.

- Hibernate October – April.
- They will use material such as corrugated iron sheeting & black polythene as warm refuges.
- They will only bite if provoked and although generally not dangerous, you should seek immediate medical attention.

Mis-identification.

The slow worm (right) is not a snake but a lizard that has lost its legs through its evolution. They are relatively slow moving, even when disturbed, and move rather stiffly. They have a glossy body, often with a metallic sheen. Snakes are much faster moving than slow worms, and move in a smoother manner. Snakes in the UK have a matt appearance, very unlike the shiny appearance of a slow worm.



However, the slow worm is **also protected** by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.