

LONDON, ESSEX & HERTFORDSHIRE AMPHIBIAN AND REPTILE TRUST

Registered Charity No. 1089466

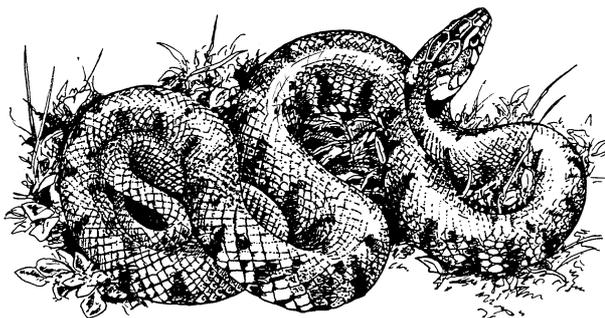
Grass Snake (*Natrix natrix*)

FACT SHEET No. 10

Recognition

Typically a long and graceful snake. Males usually to 75 cm, while females may reach over 1 metre.

Background colour can be variable but is usually green, olive or brownish, with dark vertical bars at intervals along the flanks. All black specimens may occur. A yellow collar, edged with black, is present behind the head. Occasionally, it can vary in colour or be absent completely.



Status & Distribution

The grass snake is confined to England and Wales, with occasional records from southern Scotland. It is not present in Ireland.

General Ecology

The grass snake is largely associated with river valley systems, although within these it can be found in a variety of habitats, including both wetland areas and drier meadows, farmland and even heathland. They feed mainly on amphibian prey, although fish may also be taken.

Females seek out sites, such as compost and manure heaps, for egg-laying in July. Grass snakes are one of only two species in Europe to make regular use of artificial warmth for the incubation of their eggs. Where breeding sites, feeding areas and hibernation sites are not close by, grass snakes are capable of moving up to a mile along suitable corridors that makes the estimation of population sizes difficult.

Peak hatching time is in September and, since several females can gather to lay up to 40 eggs each, this may have led to tales of "snake plagues". Like their parents, the pencil-sized babies feed on amphibians and hibernate from late September to April.

When captured, grass snakes can feign death and release an unpleasant smelling chemical from their cloaca. Despite this, they are often eaten by birds and larger mammals.

Conservation

Grass snakes are the rarest of the four nationally widespread reptile species (slow-worm, common lizard and adder) and have declined mainly due to agricultural intensification and the decline of rural amphibian populations. Road construction and urbanisation have also contributed to their decline through the destruction of habitat and by acting as barriers to the natural movement of snakes.

Like all our other native reptiles, they receive protection from killing and injuring under the Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981, as amended). Legal protection is, however, only a useful conservation tool when the presence of the animals on a site is recognised in advance of any development. Since most of our reptiles are under-recorded, many sites are likely to be lost without any consideration being given to the possible presence of grass snakes.

Frequent Questions

What can I do to help grass snakes?

All records of grass snakes are important and any observations should be sent to your county Amphibian & Reptile Group. If you live in an area with grass snakes, you can make your garden more attractive to them by constructing a compost heap for egg laying (further details available from the address below) and a pond to provide amphibian food.

How can I stop grass snakes eating my fish?

Grass snakes rarely eat ornamental fish, such as Koi and goldfish, although they are often blamed for this. The provision of a second wildlife pond for amphibians will reduce any impact on fish. Netting or mesh over any ponds should not be used as snakes may become entwined and die.

Further Information

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| Lizards of the British Isles | P. Stafford | Shire Publications |
| Snakes and lizards | T. Langton | Whittet Books |
| Reptiles and amphibians in Britain | D. Frazer | Collins New Naturalist |