

# LONDON, ESSEX & HERTFORDSHIRE AMPHIBIAN AND REPTILE TRUST

Registered Charity No. 1089466

## Adder (*Vipera berus*)

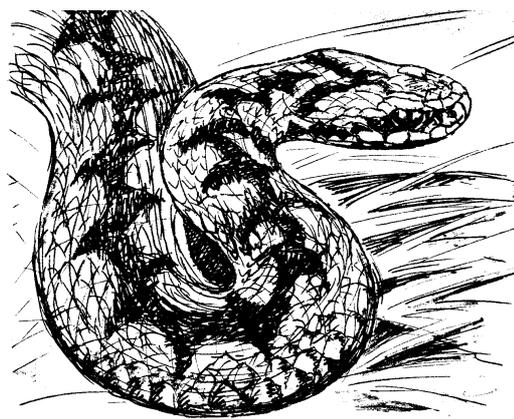
FACT SHEET No. 11

### Recognition

Adders are a stocky-looking snake, especially the females which may exceed 60 cm. Males are slightly smaller, usually averaging 50 cm.

Unusually for snakes, the sexes are dichromatic. Males tend to be grey, light brown or olive with a strongly contrasting black zig-zag pattern along the back. Females are brown or orange with a less contrasting brown zig-zag marking.

Both sexes have vertical pupils and a "V" or "X" mark on the back of the head which appears rather flattened with small scales on top.



### Status & Distribution

The adder is our most widespread snake and even occurs in to the Arctic Circle. They are present in a wide variety of habitats, such as heathland and rough grass, throughout England, Scotland and Wales but are absent from Ireland.

### General Ecology

Adders are amongst the hardiest of our reptiles, with males emerging from hibernation in early March, usually a fortnight earlier than the females. Large aggregations may be seen "lying out" near their hibernacula at this time of the year. After males have shed their skins, usually in late April, they begin to court the females and may contest their right to mate in the "dance of the adders".

This is a ritualised trial of strength between two males, involving a sinuous intertwining and pushing against each other. In most cases, females appear to have a two- year breeding cycle and they give birth in August or September of the year after mating to about six young.

Young adders, equipped with fangs like their parents, feed on small lizards. Most adults take mammalian prey, such as voles and mice, and in turn may be eaten by birds of prey and larger mammals. Their biggest predator, however, is man, although fatalities from adder bite are exceptionally rare - the last in Britain was in the early 1970s.

### **Conservation**

Although still widespread and numerous in certain well known coastal and heathland areas, such as the Gower Peninsular in south Wales and the New Forest, adders have disappeared from many of their former haunts. They are thought to be restricted to a single population in Hertfordshire, with just a handful of populations left, for example, in Greater London.

Human impact from direct persecution and habitat destruction is largely responsible, although it is an offence to kill or injure an adder under the Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981, as amended).

However, illegal persecution of this much-maligned animal continues to occur in places. With the increasing pressure now from agriculture, recreation and tourism, there is an urgent need for people to understand that a combination of respect and common sense will reduce the threat of an adder bite to effectively zero.

### **Frequent Questions**

*What is the risk of death through adder bite?*

The chances of winning the National Lottery are probably many times greater than dying from adder bite! Each year several hundred people are bitten and their symptoms, though unpleasant, normally disappear within a few days. Allergic reactions are possible but extremely uncommon.

*How can I prevent adders visiting my garden?*

Where a garden adjoins adder habitat and is used by young children, it can be made less attractive to adders by regular mowing of the grass and by ensuring that no sheltering places, such as wood and rock piles, are present.

### **Further Information**

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