

LONDON, ESSEX & HERTFORDSHIRE AMPHIBIAN AND REPTILE TRUST

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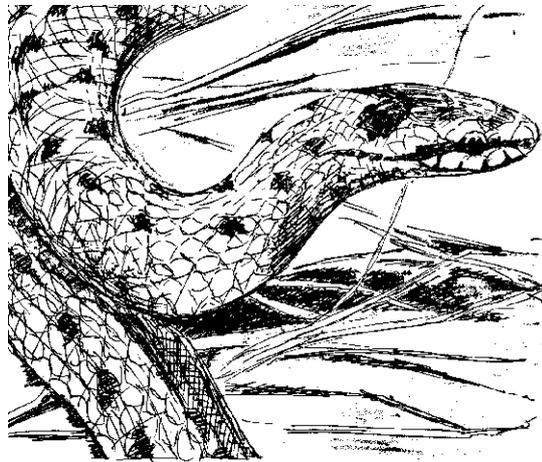
Smooth Snake (*Coronella austriaca*)

FACT SHEET No. 12

Recognition

A small, slender snake with a somewhat pointed snout, round pupils and characteristic dark stripe either side of the eye. Males grow to 50 cm, with females up to 60 cm. Females appear greyer than the more brownish males. Dark flecks and blotches are present on both the flanks and dorsal surface.

They are extremely secretive and, unlike the adder and grass snake, are rarely found basking with more than a small part of their body exposed.



Status & Distribution

The smooth snake is the rarest reptile in Britain, with a national population estimated at only several thousand adults. It shares most of its range with our other endangered species, the sand lizard, and is restricted to lowland heathland. In these areas it may occasionally also venture into adjacent habitats, such as open woodland and grassland. This habitat requirement confines the species to southern counties, with core populations in Dorset, Hampshire and Surrey.

General Ecology

Smooth snakes are so cryptic in behaviour that they were not recorded in Britain until the late nineteenth century, when they were killed in scores on the once extensive heathlands near Bournemouth.

The smooth snake is ovo-viviparous, retaining eggs inside the body until the young are ready to hatch and allowing females to actively seek out warm areas for incubation. Smooth snakes typically remain concealed in the litter under heather plants in order to avoid predators, as they are small and slow-moving. Their main prey items comprise all three of our lizard species.

Its lethargic lifestyle of "cryptic heliothermy" (basking whilst largely hidden) is accompanied by a slow growth rate, a life span up to 20 years and a biennial reproductive cycle. An adult snake may require only a dozen lizards per year to supply all its energy requirements. Prey is subdued by constriction and, in common with their larger tropical relatives, killed by asphyxiation.

Conservation

The smooth snake is fully protected from killing, injuring and disturbance under the Wildlife & Countryside Act (1981, as amended). Although it has always had a fairly local distribution, numbers have declined dramatically this century as a result of the extensive destruction of its preferred heathland habitat. As an example of this loss, 85% of Dorset's eastern heathlands have disappeared since 1900.

Remaining heathland is now extremely fragmented and each tiny pocket is often subject to development pressure, fire and invasion by trees (especially conifers) as a result of a lack of management.

The future of the smooth snake is linked directly with the future of Britain's heathlands. It is to be hoped that a combination of a Species Recovery Programme, launched by Natural England, together with a greater awareness of the ecological importance of heathlands, will halt the decline of this rare and secretive animal.

Frequent Questions

Why is the smooth snake called "smooth"?

Most species of snake, including the adder and the grass snake, have a central ridge or "keel" running through each scale on their body. The smooth snake lacks this keel and, in consequence, feels smooth and appears shiny.

How can I help to conserve smooth snakes?

The conservation of smooth snakes is a specialist task for experts. However, their work can be indirectly assisted by supporting, both through practical site management and financially, the various voluntary organisations concerned with the protection of their habitat.

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