

## Snakes

All British snakes and slow worms are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 from being killed, injured or sold.

### The Grass Snake



The grass snake is the largest species of British snake, and is olive green with darkish spots or streaks on its sides. However, colour can vary. Grass snakes have a distinctive yellow and black collar behind the head and have round pupils of the eye. They can grow to 70-100cm in length and can be found throughout Southern Britain.

The grass snake prefers rough land and fields, open woodland, wet heathlands, gardens, parks and hedgerows. They are found in areas with ponds, lakes, streams, marshes and ditches, which also provide access to sunshine for basking and plenty of shelter. They feed on frogs, toads and newts.

They are active during the day and bask in the sun to warm up. They hibernate from October to April and have been found sleeping in compost heaps. When threatened, they produce a foul-smelling liquid and may roll onto their back and play dead for up to 15 minutes.

Grass snake numbers have decreased over recent years throughout the UK, and they have been added to the list of important species for conservation. They are also protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, and the Bern Convention.

Much of the snakes' diet and preferred habitat is found in many gardens, particularly those with ponds. As their natural habitat is lost and changed, the snakes are relying increasingly on gardens with areas to forage for food and with nesting sites. Snakes will do no damage to your garden or to you as they are not venomous and do not bite, so do not discourage them.

### The Adder (or Common Viper)



This is Britain's only venomous snake. They are widespread throughout mainland Britain and are able to survive extremely harsh conditions. They are the most frequently seen British snake and are becoming more common in open woodland, hedgerows, moorland, sand dunes, riverbanks, bogs, heathland and even mountains. They are active during the day and lie on rocks until their body temperature is high enough to hunt for mice and lizards.

Most adders have obvious dark zigzag markings down the length of their back, and a reversed 'V' shape on the neck. They are generally white/pale grey/pale brown but some adders are entirely black causing them to be mistaken for other species.

Adders very rarely attack and it is unusual to find them in gardens. They use their camouflage to hide and move into the undergrowth when they feel approaching vibrations. Due to access to medical care, the risk from adder bites is much less than in the past but medical advice should be sought immediately if bitten. Adders should be treated with respect and left alone.

### **The Smooth Snake**



This is Britain's rarest snake. It is non-venomous and normally only lives in Southern England as it needs a warm climate. It feeds mainly on lizards and other reptiles.

It looks similar to an adder, but without the solid zigzag pattern on its back. This species is under threat and numbers have reduced rapidly due to the loss of lowland heathland in Southern England.

### **Slow worms**



These are often confused with snakes, but are a type of legless lizard.

They are fairly common throughout Britain and can be up to 45cm long with a round body and a bullet-shaped head. Their scales are very small giving the appearance of a metallic sheen to their brown, gold or beige colour.

Slow worms can be found in a variety of habitats including grassland, woodland and scrub and are often seen in gardens and allotments, particularly where there is little disturbance by humans.

It can be useful having a slow worm in the garden as it will feed on a variety of slow-moving garden pests, including slugs and snails. They can be found in compost heaps or under things that trap the warmth of the sun such as corrugated metal sheet or wood.

### **Further information**

[www.wildaboutgardens.org.uk](http://www.wildaboutgardens.org.uk)

[www.wildlifebritain.com](http://www.wildlifebritain.com)

[www.arc-trust.org](http://www.arc-trust.org)

Pictures kindly provided by the | **Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust**. Photo of adder taken by Chris Dresh.  
Photos of slow worm, grass snake and smooth snake taken by Howard Inns.