

## SNAKES OF THE UK by Dave and Gill Shearing

**Native UK Snakes:** The UK has three native snake species: the **Adder** (*Vipera berus*), the **Barred Grass Snake** (*Natrix helvetica*), and the **Smooth Snake** (*Coronella austriaca*).



**The Adder**, Britain's only venomous snake, is recognised by the usually black zigzag pattern seen on its back. They are found all over the UK, except in Ireland, as far North as the Highlands of Scotland. It has red eyes with vertical irises although you might not want to get that close to check!

They are found on moorland, heaths, railway embankments and marshy areas (including **Benfleet Downs**) although they are not keen on water. Food for Adders consists mainly of small rodents or Shrews. Adders are ovoviviparous, meaning females retain eggs inside their bodies and give birth to live young, typically 5 to 15 offspring in late summer.

This adaptation helps in the UK's cooler climate by keeping the developing embryos warm.

Although the Adder is venomous it would be unlikely to kill you unless you were already unwell. Because of their smaller size, dogs can experience quite severe symptoms if they are bitten, so be vigilant if you have dogs. [Grab your reader's attention with a great quote from the document or use this space to emphasise a key point. To place this text box anywhere on the page, just drag it.]



**The Barred Grass Snake**, the largest native snake at up to 4 feet long, is non-venomous and often found near ponds and wetlands where it is at home in or out of the water where it catches a lot of its food like fish, frogs and newts.

They are usually a dark grey-green colour on the upper body with distinctive black bars along its flanks. It has a pale underbelly and a yellow collar around its neck. It reproduces by laying eggs (oviparous), usually between 10 and 40, in warm, decaying vegetation like compost heaps where heat aids incubation.

Hatchlings emerge in late summer, fully independent from birth. Although it will bite, it's main defence mechanism, if threatened, is to produce a foul-smelling liquid from its anus!

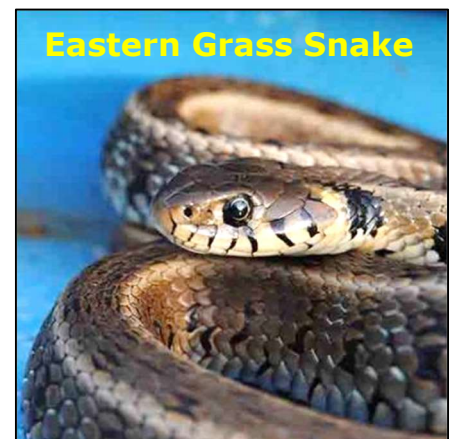
**The Smooth Snake** is very rare and restricted to southern heathlands. It reaches a maximum of 2ft in length and is a dull grey or dark brown in colour with a dark horizontal stripe through its eyes. Food consists of small rodents and lizards. Like the Adder, it is ovoviviparous, females giving birth to 4 to 15 live young in late summer.



Smooth snakes reproduce less frequently than other species, and their need for undisturbed heathland habitat makes them particularly vulnerable.

### **Non-Native UK Snakes**

**The Eastern Grass Snake** (*Natrix natrix*), a species from southern Europe, has been recorded in Surrey. It closely resembles our native Barred Grass Snake. Like its relative, it is oviparous, laying eggs in warm, decomposing vegetation.



These snakes can produce clutches of 10 to 30 eggs, and juveniles hatch after 6–10 weeks, depending on temperature.



**The Aesculapian Snake** (*Zamenis longissimus*), originally from central and Southern Europe, is the UK's longest snake, sometimes exceeding 2 metres in length. Small, thriving populations have been recorded in Wales and alongside the Regent's Canal in London.

It reproduces by laying eggs—typically 5 to 15 in a clutch, in hidden, warm spots like roof voids or compost piles. Eggs hatch after about two months, with hatchlings emerging at around 30 cm in length. Aesculapian snakes reach sexual maturity at 4 to 6 years, slower than most UK species.

They are very adept at climbing trees and their main food is Rats. Quite a bonus really unless one drops on your head from a tree!

Both species are likely to have been imported to the UK through the pet trade and escaped.