

Reptiles in Your Garden

Reptiles – snakes and lizards – are fascinating animals and an important part of our biodiversity. However, they are widely misunderstood and many people fear them unnecessarily. Reptile populations are suffering declines in both number and distribution over much of their range in Britain due to the loss and fragmentation of suitable habitat, together with persecution. Gardens may therefore provide an important refuge for these vulnerable creatures, which should be encouraged where possible.

Reptiles in Cornwall

Cornwall is commonly home to four of the six reptile species native to the UK: adder, grass snake, slow-worm and common lizard. Sand lizard has only recently been reintroduced to a location on the north Cornwall coast and smooth snake is mainly restricted to parts of Surrey, Hampshire and Dorset. In general, reptiles are found in sheltered places which provide good vegetation cover at ground level and access to exposed areas for basking in sunlight. Habitats include heathland, rough grassland, hedges and banks, verges, woodland edges and dune systems.

Worried about reptiles in your garden?

Finding a snake (or lizard) can be a shock but it is worth noting that they pose little or no threat to people or pets and are very timid, quickly disappearing to cover if disturbed. Of the reptile species occurring in Cornwall, grass snake and slow-worm are the most likely to be spotted in your garden. These are completely harmless to humans but grass snakes can bite if disturbed or handled and also exude a nasty-smelling secretion. Adder and common lizard prefer more open and undisturbed habitat such as heathland but may visit gardens if they adjoin an area of suitable countryside.



Slow-worms are common garden visitors.
Photo: CA Perry

Garden visits are usually reported from June to September and you are most likely to see reptiles on warm, sunny days. Rather than being resident they are more likely to

be just passing through or in search of food. When working in the garden be prepared to find reptiles if you lift up debris or are working near features such as hedges, ponds, compost heaps and areas of long grass.

If you are lucky enough to find reptiles seeking refuge in your garden you should treat them with respect and leave them alone.

Reptiles....did you know?

- Are covered with scales or horny plates
- Cannot generate their own body heat internally like birds and mammals, and depend on their surroundings to thermoregulate (warm up or cool down). This means basking in the sun, or being in contact with warm surfaces or air. The cooler they are, the less active they become.
- Shed their skins at least once a year depending on species, allowing growth and helping to dispose of parasites and dirt on the skin.
- In the UK, only the grass snake and sand lizard lay eggs. The others give birth to live young.
- Only active between spring and autumn, hibernating through winter in burrows or under logs, protected from the cold and predators.
- In the wild a lizard's life span is around five to six years and a snake can live to over 15 years! In captivity reptiles can live much longer.

Reptiles and the Law

Due to their rarity, all native reptile species are protected by law from killing, injury and sale under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Do not try to handle snakes and lizards as it can harm them, and remember that it is illegal to kill or injure native reptiles. Protected by law, anyone wishing to remove reptiles or deter them from using a garden has to have a very good reason. In practice this might be if there are adders in a garden where children and pets play.

As a last resort, reptiles may be discouraged from entering your garden by managing the area carefully, for example keep grass cut short, don't let areas of dense vegetation grow up, remove hiding places such as log or stone piles and use sealed bins for compost. However, even if you do all this, adders from adjoining habitat may still use the edges of your lawn for basking. These measures will also reduce the overall wildlife value of your garden and surely snakes and lizards should be valued as an important and special part of our Cornish fauna.



Identification guide

Grass snake (*Natrix natrix*)

Description

The UK's largest snake, reaching around 100-130 cm. Usually grey-green with distinctive yellow/cream/white and black collar around neck. Sides of body marked with black vertical bars and spots. Non-venomous.



Photo: Terry Dunstan

Habits

Lives in a variety of rough habitats with long grass and usually close to a standing body of water. Can travel long distances. If cornered can feign death.

Occasional garden visitor, attracted to compost heaps (sometimes used as egg-laying sites) and ponds. Swims well and hunts in water for amphibians (frogs and newts) and small fish.

Slow-worm (*Anguis fragilis*)

Description

Can reach up to 40 cm. Legless lizard often mistaken for a snake. Upper part of body usually brown, grey, bronze or brick red with shiny appearance. May have black/dark brown sides and thin stripe on back. Small head, often with dark spot. Tail sometimes appears blunt after being shed to escape predators.



Photo: Geoffery Jones

Habits

Reptile most likely to be seen in gardens. Prefers undisturbed areas of long grass with refuges such as log piles or compost heaps. Feeds mainly on slugs and snails – a gardener's friend!

Sand lizard (*Lacerta agilis*)



Photo: Amphibian and Reptile Conservation

Sand lizards are larger (up to 20cm) and more stocky in appearance than common lizards but they are sometimes confused as the males of both species can be bright green. The sand lizard is thought to have occupied Cornish dune systems in the past and specialists introduced the species to a site on the north coast of Cornwall in 1995, aiming to help this threatened and specially protected species.

Adder (*Vipera berus*)

Description

Males up to 60 cm, females up to 75 cm. Distinctive thick, dark zigzag stripe along length of back, row of dark spots along each side and inverted 'V' or 'X' shaped marking on head. Background colour varies: males typically grey, creamy white or steely grey, females range from browns and yellows to brick red. Entirely black adders sometimes occur. The UK's only venomous snake.



Photo: Terry Dunstan

Habits

Rarely strays into gardens as generally restricted to distinct patches of 'natural' habitat such as heathland and rough grassland. Normally seen basking in sunny spots. Feeds mainly on field voles and other small mammals but also lizards, nestling birds, eggs and amphibians.

Common lizard (*Zootoca vivipara*) (formerly *Lacerta vivipara*)

Description

Typically up to 16 cm. Very variable colour but usually shades of grey, brown or dark green with a complex pattern of light and dark spots, flecks and stripes. Vivid green colour of some males in breeding season sometimes leads to misidentification as sand lizard. Underside is cream, yellow or orange and brighter in males. Young very dark brown/black. Sometimes confused with newts.



Photo: Kim Jelbert

Habits

Thought to be a fairly common garden visitor but largely goes unnoticed as very quick to move away if disturbed. Commonly found on Cornish hedges. Other typical habitats include open grassland, heaths, sandy areas and moors with lots of basking spots. Gardens can also provide suitable habitats such as rockeries or exposed log piles. Feeds on spiders, small earthworms, snails and insects including flies, moths, beetles and ants.

Need help with identification?

Contact the Wildlife Information Service

Tel: (01872) 240777 ext 250

Email: wis@cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk

How to create a reptile-friendly garden....

Gardens can provide an invaluable refuge for our threatened reptiles, and we can happily co-exist with these remarkable animals. Here are some ways to help encourage snakes and lizards into your garden retreat:

- Leave parts of your garden undisturbed, including areas of long grass/wildflower meadow, scrub and hedgerow with plenty of undergrowth, but also retain some shorter areas of vegetation for basking.
- Construct log piles or rockeries with lots of crevices close to clumps of dense vegetation. Stones/logs for basking should face east, south and west for use at different times of the day.
- Ensure there is free entry at ground level around the edge of the garden, for example by creating gaps under fencing.
- Create a compost heap to provide a warm spot for shelter and hibernation, plenty of slugs for slow-worms and an egg-laying site for grass snakes.
- Dig a pond to encourage amphibians, an important prey for grass snakes.
- Leave some surrounding areas overgrown to allow snakes to approach in safety and do not use netting over ponds (or vegetable plots) as snakes often die after being caught up. If you have to use netting, try to use rigid netting material with a mesh size of at least 4 cm.

- When mowing your lawn, begin at the centre of the grass and expand outwards, encouraging reptiles (and other wildlife) towards the margins.
- Reduce the chances of harming reptiles by cutting grass on very cold days (when they are inactive and remain in their underground shelters) or very hot days (when they are above ground but very active and alert), rather than cool to medium days when they may be above ground but sluggish.
- Leave out wooden boards, roofing felt or corrugated iron sheets to help you discover if reptiles are using your garden; they will either bask on top or use them as shelter:



Checking reptile tins for occupants.
Photo: David Chapman

Adder encounters

You are more likely to encounter an adder when out in the countryside. During the summer months adders can be found across the county in good numbers and virtually any large areas of grassland and heathland may hold them.



Photo: Terry Dunstan

Adders will normally move away undetected at the first sign of disturbance, so if you do spot one it's probably basking, still quite cool and as a result lethargic and slow-moving; Whilst adders are our only native venomous snake, remember that they are a timid species and we pose far more of a threat to them.

If you do see an adder it is best just observed and left alone; bites from adders are very rare and people are usually only bitten during attempts to catch or handle them. Most reactions to bites are mild, even to pets and children, as an adder's venom is designed to kill only small mammal prey. In Britain only 12 people in the last 100 years have been fatally bitten by an adder, the last of these in the 1970s. However, any bite should be regarded as potentially serious and immediate medical advice should be sought. Vets and doctors in areas where adders are found are aware of the treatment required in handling bite cases and effective treatment is now well understood.

A few sensible precautions should lower any risk when in any potential adder habitat, for example wear suitable footwear, stick to paths, keep dogs on leads and take care when sitting down.

Further information and advice

Wildlife Information Service (WIS)
Environmental Records Centre for Cornwall
and the Isles of Scilly (ERCCIS)
Five Acres, Allet, Truro, Cornwall TR4 9DJ

Tel: (01872) 302 250
Email: wis@cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk
Web: www.ercis.org.uk

Other useful contacts

- Amphibian and Reptile Conservation
www.arc-trust.org, tel: (01202) 391319
- Cornwall Reptile & Amphibian Group contact via ERCCIS
- Amphibian and Reptile Groups UK
www.arguk.org
- Froglife
www.froglife.org, info@froglife.org

Get involved

Share your sightings with us
Online Recording for Kernow and Scilly (ORKS)

www.ercis.org.uk/ORKS

Become a member
www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk