

The adder (*Vipera berus berus*)



By far the rarer of the two snake species that occur in the parish (the other is the grass snake), adders are associated with more hyperbole. While the adder is a venomous species, it poses very little threat to humans. No, really!

There have only been 12 fatalities since 1876, the last in 1975. (Most deaths are attributed to crude early antivenins.) To put those deaths into perspective, in 2009 33 people drowned in their own baths, 182 choked to death while eating and 644 died falling down stairs (figures from the Office for National Statistics). But what if you are a risk-adverse, bungalow-living, soup-eating parishioner who only takes showers? Well, about 100 people are bitten in the UK each year, the victims are usually male and are bitten (wait for it) while trying to pick up an adder with their bare hands! Healthy humans usually fully recover within three weeks. Adders are naturally timid and will slip into cover long before most people see them and only in extremis will they bite. However, in that unlikely event, do seek medical advice ASAP.



As a species the adder is extremely widespread; it can be found across all of Britain, through Western Europe across to Far East Asia, even inside the Arctic circle. Its favoured habitats all share structural similarities essential for

different aspects of its behaviour. These habitats include heathlands, commons, downland, open woodland and road and rail embankments. They are rarely found in gardens.

The adder is easily recognised by a dark 'zig-zag' stripe along its back. There is often a row of dark spots along each flank and a 'V' or 'X' shape on the head. Background colours vary from grey-white in the male to shades of brown or copper in the female. On occasion, completely black specimens are described (see our website for a picture). Adders usually grow to around 50–60cm in length, with a maximum in Britain of 80–87cm, and have rather a stocky appearance. They have a red eye and are the only native reptile with a vertically split pupil.

Diet consists mainly of small mammals, such as voles, mice, and shrews, as well as lizards and sometimes slow worms. They will also eat amphibians. Juveniles eat small lizards, slow worms, spiders and young frogs. Research has shown that adders take a long time to digest their food and can survive on as little as one vole a month. Adders are predated on by birds of prey, corvids and occasionally herons, although sadly humans – or rather the millions of pheasants we release into the countryside every year now – account for most adder deaths.

The mating period varies, depending on the weather conditions, but is usually the last two weeks of April or the first week of May. Females breed every two or three years because of the energy demands involved. Juveniles are live born in late summer with markings that match those of adults.

The adder is a cold adapted snake and hibernates in the winter for 150–180 days in Britain. Identifying and safeguarding hibernation sites are crucial steps in conservation efforts for this species. Hibernation sites are used for life and must be dry and protected from frost and predators.

JW