

# The grass snake (*Natrix natrix helvetica*)



Still a widespread and familiar snake within the Parish, the grass snake is the more abundant of our two native snake species and completely harmless to humans. The other species is, of course, the adder.

The grass snake is easily distinguished by its yellow collar, which consists of two yellow or orange patches, each with a black crescent shaped mark to the rear. The sexes are similar: both are typically olive green in colour with black bars or spots along the flanks. Females are larger and bulkier in appearance than males and have a broader head.

The grass snake is Britain's most impressive reptile. Males reach up to 90cm in length and females 130cm. Larger examples have been recorded, including a female at over 1.83m – but they are rare.

Grass snakes are strong swimmers and may be found close to fresh water, although there is evidence that a snake may not make use of any water bodies throughout an entire season. There is something of a misconception about grass snakes and wet habitats. Their preferred habitat appears to be open woodland and 'edge' habitat, such as field margins and woodland borders, as these offer adequate refuge while still affording ample opportunity for thermoregulation through basking.

Grass snakes prey mainly on amphibians, which would at first glance reinforce the perception of it as a wetland species. However all native amphibians are mostly terrestrial and spend most of their lives away from water.

The keys to grass snake conservation are to create/maintain appropriate habitats and to identify and protect hibernation sites. Gardens, especially semi-rural ones, have an important role to play. Ponds and compost heaps can offer vital help to this species. A fish-free, well-designed wildlife pond will boost their amphibian food supply while a compost heap in a sunny spot should provide good egg laying opportunities.

If you are lucky enough to already have grass snakes in the garden, you will rarely see them, although you might find a slough. Snakes slough their skin at

least once during the active season. Fluid builds up beneath the old skin, which makes the snake appear dull and turns the fixed lens of the eye opaque with a tint of blue. The old skin eventually breaks away around the mouth and, as the snake moves forward, a combination of the skin snagging on vegetation and muscle contractions removes the old skin in one inside-out piece.

JW