



Snakes in Yorkshire

Yorkshire has two species of snakes, the grass snake and the adder. Both of which are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981.

Often the slow worm is also thought of as a snake, however it is actually a legless lizard!

Grass snakes

Grass snakes are typically olive-green, brown or greyish in colour and have a variable row of black bars along its sides. Its underside is off-white or yellowish with dark triangular or rectangular markings, and it grows to over 100 cm's long.

Grass snakes eat amphibians including frogs, toads and newts, but they are also known to eat small mammals, young birds and some fish.

Their preferred habitat is wetlands, although they can also be found in dry grasslands, on rough land and even in gardens, especially those with pond nearby. These snakes are most likely to be seen in the summer, basking near a pond or swimming in the water - they are excellent swimmers! During the winter months, from October to April they usually hibernate.



Grass snake - Credit Jamie Hall



Adder - Credit Elliott Neep (elliottneep.com)

Despite their appearance grass snakes are harmless; occasionally if cornered grass snakes may show aggression in the form of hissing loudly and recoiling into a pose that looks as if it will strike, however this is usually a bluff. Most often a frightened grass snake will 'play dead' if approached.

Adders

Adders are identifiable by their characteristic dark zig-zag markings along their back and a dark coloured 'V' on their head. Males are often light grey/silver in colour, whilst females are brown. They grow to around 65 cm's in length.

Adders eat lizards and small mammals, as well as ground-nesting birds. Like all snakes adders eat their prey whole - their teeth are designed to grip the prey as it is swallowed.

Adders can be found in woodland, heathland and moorland habitats. They hibernate from October and usually start emerge during the first warm days of March. It is during March that they are most commonly spotted.



The adder is the only venomous snake native to Britain; they are known to have the most highly developed venom injecting mechanism of all snakes! Despite this they are not aggressive animals and adders will only use their venom as a last means of defence, usually if caught or trodden on. No-one has died from an adder bite in Britain for over 20 years. With proper treatment, the worst effects are nausea and drowsiness, followed by severe swelling and bruising in the area of the bite. Most people who are bitten were handling the snake so the best advice is leave them alone and they'll leave you!

What about slow worms?

Despite its appearance, slow worms or blind worms, as they are also known, are not snakes but in fact a harmless, legless lizard.

Slow worms are often referred to as the 'gardeners' friend' as it likes to eat slugs. It is a priority species, as its population has dramatically declined in recent years due to habitat loss. Nevertheless they are occasionally spotted in Yorkshire. One easy way to identify them, is to look at their eyes - snakes eyes are lidless, whereas lizards like slow worms have eyelids.



Slow worm - Credit Les Gibbon

What to do if you find a snake

The first step is to identify what kind of snake it is. However, once you have done this, even if you are sure you have identified it correctly and know it to be harmless, you should never handle snakes.

If you are unfortunate enough to be bitten by a snake you should take immediate action, even if you believe the snake to be harmless. The NHS has a helpful page on the treatment of snake bites: www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Bites-snake/Pages/Treatment.aspx

How the Wildlife Trust help

Yorkshire Wildlife Trust work closely with planners, developers and farmers to ensure that habitats suitable for snakes are protected by developing a Living Landscape: networks of habitats and wildlife corridors across town and country, which are good for both wildlife and people. If you would like to help look after grass snakes and other reptiles in your garden then leave piles of logs which they can use for hibernating beneath.

Find out more

If you would like to find out more about Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and how to become a member, plus more about the work we do for snakes and wildlife in Yorkshire then please contact us using the details below.

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