

all about

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SLOW-WORM AND ADDER

Anguis fragilis / *Vipera berus*

The adder is the only snake found in the wild in Scotland. Slow-worms are often mistaken for snakes but they are in fact legless lizards. Adders and slow-worms are both reptiles. Reptiles do not have their own internal heating system so their body temperature depends on their surroundings. They need the heat of the sun to warm them up which helps to explain why there are so few kinds of

reptile in Scotland. Their bodies are covered in scales which protect them. As they grow, the scaly skin becomes too small for their body and they shed their skin. Their flickering tongues are in fact sense organs which 'taste' the air.

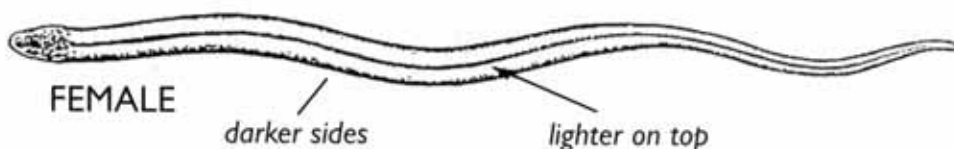
Spotting the difference

Adders can be up to around 65cm long and have very obvious dark zigzag markings along their backs. The female

ADDER



SLOW-WORM



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is reddish brown with dark brown markings and is larger than the male. The male is usually pale grey with black markings.

On warm days adders are sometimes seen basking in the sun. They flatten themselves against the ground to expose as much as possible of their body to the sun. They are not aggressive and usually hide when they are disturbed. The bite of an adder can kill small animals but it is very unusual for it to kill a human. Far more people die from bee and wasp stings than the bite of adders.

Slow-worms are usually around 30–40 cm long with a shiny body which looks as though it has been varnished. The female is golden brown with a black stripe along the back of her body. The male is a brownish grey colour and has no stripe, although sometimes they have small blue spots on the sides of their body. Young slow-worms are a golden colour with a black line. Unlike snakes, slow-worms have ear holes and moving eyelids. Their tails come off if they are attacked by other animals. This distracts the predator and allows them to escape. Slow-worms are found throughout most parts of Scotland but they do not usually lie out in the open.

What do they eat?

Adders eat lizards, mice, voles and young birds. They bite their prey, injecting poison into its body. They then release the animal, wait for it to die and finally swallow it whole. Adders have few predators apart from birds of prey.

Humans are their greatest enemy.

Slow-worms eat slugs, earthworms and other small animals. They hunt during the day, especially after rain. Slow-worms are eaten by many other animals including adders, buzzards, eagles, foxes, badgers, rats, hedgehogs and cats.

Life cycle

Adders hibernate from October until the spring in clumps of brushwood, under tree roots, in burrows made by rabbits and other mammals and in holes and crevices in sunny banks. They often hibernate in groups. The males appear in March and the females emerge 2–3 weeks later. Rival males have mock fights during which they rise up above the ground then coil themselves around each other while trying to push each other to the ground. Mating takes place in May. Female adders breed every second year. They give birth to around 6–20 live young in August or September. The young adders are about the length of a pencil and feed on baby lizards and other small animals. Adders return to their wintering site when the weather gets cold.

Slow-worms hibernate underground from October to March. You are most likely to see a slow-worm in the late spring when they emerge from hibernation. They produce 6–12 live young in August or September.

Where do they live?

Both adders and slow-worms are found in open areas where there are low

growing plants.

Adders live in moorland, bogs, rough grassland, open woodland and coastal areas.

Slow-worms live in similar places to adders and may even be found in towns and cities. They burrow into light soil, including newly dug gardens and spend much of their life underground. They are sometimes found lying in compost heaps, log piles and under stones.

Humans and adders and slow-worms

Many adders are killed on sight because people are afraid of them. However it is actually illegal to kill an adder or a slow-worm.

There are now fewer places in Scotland for adders and slow-worms to find shelter and food than there were in the past. People have changed the way that they farm and plant forests and in doing so have destroyed or damaged the habitats of these animals. As more land has been used for farming it has become a less suitable habitat for snakes and lizards. Areas of rough grass where they could find shelter from birds and other predators' and where their prey also lived, have been removed. Many moorland areas have been turned into conifer plantations. However steps are being taken to protect reptiles. All British reptiles are protected by law. The conservation of suitable habitats for reptiles has been encouraged by Scottish Natural Heritage and other organisations.

Finding out more

Snakes and lizards

Tom Langton (Whittet Books).

Snakes need friends

Froglife Advice Sheet 2 (Available from Froglife)

How you can help

You could become involved with groups of other people concerned with the future of Scotland's wildlife. Check your local newspaper or library for information about groups in your area.

Scottish Wildlife WATCH, which is part of the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT), produces a magazine and Scottish newsletter which include information about environmental issues and give you the chance to help wildlife by taking part in projects and surveys.

Contact: Scottish Wildlife Watch,
Cramond House, Cramond Glebe Road,
Edinburgh EH4 6NS

Organisations concerned with both reptile and amphibian conservation include the Young Herpetologist Club and Froglife.

Contact: The Young Herpetologists Club.
The British Herpetological Society, c/o
Zoological Society of London, Regent's
Park, London NW1 4RY

Froglife, Triton House, Bramfield,
Halesworth, Suffolk IP19 9AE

Glossary

Habitat

The place in which an animal or plant lives.

Hibernation

A sleep-like state which allows an animal to survive the winter.

Plantation

An area of planted woodland (often used to describe large areas recently planted, mainly with conifers).

Predator

An animal that kills and eats other animals.

Prey

An animal that is killed and eaten by another animal.

