

Poisonous reputation

It might be Britain's only venomous snake, but the adder should be celebrated and protected rather than feared

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Few wild creatures so perfectly illustrate our modern-day disconnection from the countryside as the adder. 'What is Britain's only poisonous snake?' is one of the most common questions asked in pub quizzes and general knowledge tests, yet many people are unaware that such a potentially deadly creature lives in this country. One frequently hears stories of adders venturing out to sun themselves, lying peacefully on a warm rock or heathery bank until a passer-by picks them up – and is surprised to receive an unpleasant and very painful bite. One tourist on the Isle of Arran picked up two so he could be photographed holding them. Both bit him. He claimed he did not know about the danger.

Khaki-clad snake-charming heroes from television have done little to help the situation. In fact, their antics are sometimes blamed for fuelling the bravado of their fans and persuading men in particular to attempt heroics with serpents. Those bitten often go on to publicise their adventures, proclaiming that the countryside is infested with snakes and should be cleansed forthwith.

That is an ill-informed, unhelpful point of view and one that is very disrespectful towards our most beautiful reptile. Accidents can and do happen, of course, which is a different matter, but in general adders are hardly a threat, preferring to rush away when disturbed. As happens so often, it's only when humans interfere that trouble occurs.

The infamous serpent of the Garden of Eden did little for the reputation of the species, and since earliest times the snake has been seen as the embodiment of all our worst characteristics – untrustworthy, treacherous and sly. There are many lethally poisonous snakes around the world that pose a real danger to humans, of course, but this is far from the case with Scotland's only true snake (the glassy-looking slowworm is benign and is in fact a legless lizard, and the grass snake and smooth snake are only found south of the border).

Statistically there is a far higher chance of being struck by lightning or dying as a result of anaphylactic shock caused by a wasp or bee sting than there is of being killed by an adder. It is now at least 30 years since they caused a

Opposite and below: The adder can be found across Scotland. It is very common on Jura, with Perthshire, Angus and the east coast also hotspots.

PHOTO CREDIT: LEFT – URADNIKOV/SERGEY/SHUTTERSTOCK; RIGHT – ERIC ISSELEE/SHUTTERSTOCK



‘There is a far higher chance of being struck by lightning than there is of being killed by an adder’

human fatality in this country; dogs, however, can and do die as a result of being bitten by a dozing adder as they will seldom back off when faced with a surprised snake.

The 19th-century naturalist Charles St John neatly describes the poisonous fangs of the adder: ‘They greatly resemble the talons of a cat in shape and can be raised or laid on the jaw according to the wish of their owner.’ Studies suggest that 70% of adder bites are in fact dry – in other words, they do not inject venom into their victim. Should you be unlucky enough to receive an adder bite, forget the old ideas of sucking poison from the wound or using a tourniquet. Instead, the victim should be kept calm and taken for immediate medical help. It is often the terror and panic that sets in following a snakebite that causes the most harm.

The adder’s main prey is small mammals, amphibians (but not toads) and small birds. Adults eat surprisingly little: over the course of a year, they will probably consume the equivalent of less than a dozen voles. The tawny owl, by comparison, needs at least two per day. Once a victim has been struck, it will take a few minutes for it to die, and a long time for the meal to be consumed whole.

Adders frequently become prey themselves. Buzzards, ravens and herons regularly take them, and foxes, badgers and hedgehogs are also adept at dealing with snakes. Perhaps the most surprising enemy is the pheasant. Despite its successful adaptation to the British countryside, the bird has retained inherent traits from its distant Eastern origins where snakes pose a very real threat. Pheasants not only consume

young adders, they are also known to kill adult adders purely for the sake of it.

During March’s unseasonably hot weather, there were a lot more sightings of adders. This does not mean there are more adders about, simply that, like us, they were out enjoying the warmth. For at least six months of the year, this secretive reptile hides away, often with a large group of others, in a hibernaculum. I have only once come across the spectacular sight of a tightly packed knot of adders sleeping together when my dogs disturbed earth under rocks on a south-facing hillside in Glen Lyon.

Distinctively patterned, the adder’s skin has huge colour variation and it is one of the few snakes to show clear sexual dimorphism. Males tend to be a much darker black and grey than the females, which often range from grey

to rich shades of yellow ochre and deep tan. Both have the distinctive zigzag pattern and V on the head. Females can grow up to two foot in length. Adders do not have eyelids, so will sometimes put their heads under the rest of their bodies to shade their reddish-brown eyes from the sun. The old myth that they hypnotise their prey before striking comes from this inability to blink. There are lots of other myths connected with them: many Highlanders, for example, believed that adders only died after sunset; others were convinced that their lively dance at mating time was some sort of ballet – in fact, it’s just the males fighting for supremacy.

The serpent’s tale

Adders usually breed every two to three years; they give birth to live young encased in a membrane – sometimes up to 12 perfect little replicas of their parents. Immediately independent, they survive on the yolk sac until they catch their first prey. They are also equipped with venom as soon as they emerge.

The island of Jura remains a stronghold for the species and there are thought to be more adders there than anywhere else in Scotland. There are other known hotspots, from the wooded moorlands of Perthshire and Angus to sand dunes on the east coast. Sadly, as with so many other creatures, loss of habitat remains a major threat; worse, despite being protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, it is not unknown for adders to be killed on sight.

George Orwell spent several years on Jura. Even though the writer was reputed to be a great animal lover, he was described by one biographer as having once spotted an enormous adder on the nearby island of Scarba, putting his foot on it, and then filleting the poor creature deliberately with his knife, much to the surprise of his companion. Adders seem to have always invoked dramatic reactions, and our view of them has led to the unflattering expression, ‘having a tongue like an adder’, or viper.

As the Right to Roam understandably causes many landowners grief through unruly dogs and a lack of respect from some visitors to the countryside, it has become more common to see ‘Beware Adders!’ signs on the moors. As a mere 5% of today’s British population have roots in the countryside, this brings me back to our total disassociation and ignorance of rural matters. The landowners who put up these signs count on this ignorance and know the terror the thought of snakes will instil in visiting urbanites. ‘Beware Ticks!’ would actually be a far more useful warning, as these are a much worse threat to our health and well-being, while the adder is a beautiful and integral part of our native biodiversity. 🐍

Above: The adder’s skin has a distinctive zigzag pattern. Its reddish-brown eyes are always open – it doesn’t have eyelids – and this inability to blink is the source of the myth that snakes hypnotise their prey.