



LIVING WITH... REPTILES

Britain is home to 6 native species of reptile, 3 lizards and 3 snakes. Whilst some can be found throughout England and Wales, others are rare and restricted to a few areas.

Reptiles evolved more than 300 million years ago and today inhabit every continent on earth except Antarctica. The skin of reptiles is covered in scales or plates and is shed as the animal grows. Reptiles are also incapable of generating their own internal body heat, as birds or mammals do, and so are often incorrectly referred to as 'cold-blooded'. Because of this, reptiles are reliant on external heat sources and have developed strategies for thermoregulation (controlling their internal temperature) like sun-basking and using warmed surfaces or air. The cooler a reptile is, the less active they will become, a function exploited by British reptiles, all of whom hibernate between October and March to avoid the lowest temperatures.

A great number of British reptiles die in their first year, generally due to predation, the severity of the winter or during hibernation. Research suggests however that once a reptile has survived their first 12 months, their likely average lifespan increases to around 10 years. Some snakes have even been found living up to 18 years old.

British lizards have been found to generally keep within specific areas due to territorial breeding behaviour. By comparison, British snake species will travel surprising distances if the weather is favourable and they can find suitable habitats; grass snakes have been observed travelling up to 4 miles.

The exact timing of reptile reproduction depends on the species and weather conditions. Generally, mating will occur between April and June, with young emerging between July and September.

Natural predators of reptiles include birds of prey, magpies, crows, foxes, badgers, hedgehogs and other



Grass snake

reptiles. Snakes themselves feed on a range of prey; from fish, lizards and frogs to small mammals such as mice and young birds. Lizards prey on insects, spiders, molluscs and other invertebrates.

Reptiles have an important role in our ecosystem, and represent an important part of Britain's natural heritage. Despite this however, the populations of our native species have all declined dramatically in the last 30 years.

British reptiles face many threats, the biggest of which is the fragmentation and loss of suitable habitats as ponds, hedgerows, heathland, grassland and dunes are replaced by agricultural, residential and industrial developments. Other threats include reptile-hostile gardens, abundant unnatural predators (cats and dogs), lawn mowers and garden netting, a common, unintentional 'wildlife trap'.

Are reptiles protected?

Under the **Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981** (as amended) all native British reptile species are legally protected. The killing, injury or sale of any species is an offence; however the taking of adders, grass snakes, common lizards or slow worms from the wild is permitted. The smooth snake and sand lizard also receive additional protection under the **Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations** that prohibits disturbance of the animal or damage caused to their habitat. Once captive, any reptile will be protected under the **Animal Welfare Act 2006** and we strongly discourage taking or keeping wild animals in captivity. Additionally, the keeping of adders in captivity requires a **Dangerous Wild Animal licence**.

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How can I help reptiles in my garden?

Reptiles need places to **bask**, **forage for food**, **shelter** and **hibernate**. These needs can be met with the following additions to your garden:

- Ponds or streams (grass snakes particularly).
- Compost and grass cutting heaps.
- 'Wildlife areas' with long grass and overgrown, shrubby vegetation.
- Wood, rock and rubble piles.
- A gap of an inch or so between the floor of your shed and the ground.
- Rockeries and rock walls.
- Open, sunny areas free of shade.
- A 'hibernaculum' for overwintering reptiles (lay down some old logs, rocks or brick-rubble, pack with wood chips and loosely cover with soil).

Reptiles are best off being left in peace, so try not to disturb them especially during winter when they hibernate and summer when they might have young. Be aware of the threats your garden (and pets) might pose to the reptiles.

The RSPCA cannot move reptiles unless there is a reason to be concerned for their welfare.



European Adder

Are there non-native reptiles in Britain?

Non-native reptiles are occasionally seen in Britain; these are usually pets that have escaped or been released, although a few species have established breeding populations. If you see a reptile you think may be an escaped or released exotic pet, see the bottom of this sheet for advice. **It is an offence to release or allow to escape any non-native reptile into the wild.**



Slow worm

How can I deter reptiles from my garden?

The image of British reptiles as dangerous is rarely justified and given the threats faced by reptiles in Britain they really need to be encouraged and supported. When they are seen in gardens they are generally just passing through and will shy away from humans. However, acceptable methods to help deter reptiles from your garden include:

- Keeping grass short and maintaining flower beds etc.
- Removing cover such as rock piles.
- Using enclosed bins.
- Repairing holes, cracks and crevices in buildings, patios and decking.
- Keep busy in the garden; most snakes are very timid and any activity in the garden is likely to deter them.

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What do I do if bitten by a snake?

Most bites are accidental and happen after having disturbed or deliberately antagonised the snake. Snakes will never chase after you to bite you – rather, they will go as fast as they can in the opposite direction. If you are worried about encountering snakes, stomp as you walk. Snakes are sensitive to ground vibration and will quickly move away. **If you do see a snake, leave it alone, do not try to touch it and keep children and pets away.**

The adder is the only venomous snake native to Britain (see above) and its venom is not very potent. If you are bitten however, keep the bitten limb still and get to the nearest A&E as soon as you can. If a person who has been bitten loses consciousness (some are particularly sensitive to snake bites, as with bee stings), call an ambulance.

Adder bites can be extremely dangerous to pets (particularly if the animal is bitten on the face), causing swelling, bleeding or fever. Dogs walked in adder habitats during spring and summer are more at risk. Animals with suspected adder bites should be kept as quiet and calm as possible, and examined urgently by a vet.

**To report an injured
or sick
reptile to the RSPCA
please ring the 24-
hour cruelty and
advice line on
0300 1234 999**

**If you see a dead reptile please
report it to
www.gardenwildlifehealth.org**



Sand lizard female (left) and male (right)

I have found a reptile, what do I do?

Don't touch. If the reptile is a native species and it is uninjured, leave it alone. Most reptiles will move away from humans or human activity. If this does not happen, or the reptile is obviously injured, contact the RSPCA on the number below. **Reptiles need specialist care** and it is not recommended that you try to look after them yourself, local wildlife rehabilitators will be far better suited to care for them.

There is always the possibility that it may be an exotic pet that has escaped. **Never touch;** if you are not sure of what it is, or if you know it is not native, it (particularly if it is a snake) may be dangerous. **Always assume an unidentified snake is dangerous.** If the reptile is in a house or a building, try to isolate and monitor it but do not attempt to confine it. Ask around nearby to see if anyone knows of it and call the RSPCA on the number below.



Common or "viviparous" lizard