Snakes in gardens
Frequently asked questions

I’ve just seen a snake in my garden. What should I do?

Many people are delighted to spot a snake in their garden—it’s a rare wildlife treat. We recognise that it can be alarming for some, however. Please be assured that there is no reason to worry. The vast majority of snakes that turn up in gardens are entirely harmless to people and pets. Even on the very rare occasions that a venomous snake appears in a garden, the situation can be resolved.

It is most likely that you have seen either a grass snake or a slow-worm (a legless lizard that looks very much like a snake). We can say this confidently, based on thousands of enquiries handled by ARC. Neither species is harmful to people or pets, and it is best to simply leave them alone — you don’t need to do anything. Learning a little more about snakes may put you at ease, and we hope the information here will help. It’s best to start off by identifying the snake.

What type of snake have I seen?

Our poster, Identifying Britain’s snakes, will help you to decide which snake you’ve seen. For more detail, we have a reptile identification guide, and there’s even more help on our website.

If you email us a photo or description, or post it on our Facebook page or Twitter account, we’ll try to identify it. Please note the colour, markings, length and where it is in your garden. The following is a brief guide.

**Grass snake.** The snake reported most often in gardens: in or near ponds, in sunny spots or on compost heaps. Widespread in central and southern Britain, rarer in north. Distinctive yellow/white and black markings behind head. Usual length 70-100 cm.

**Slow-worm.** Actually a lizard although it closely resembles a snake. Found throughout Britain. Often in gardens: found under objects such as paving stones, in long grass and compost heaps. May have thin stripe down back, and dark sides. Shiny appearance. Tail often blunt. Usual length 35-40 cm.
Adder. Although they’re found in all regions of Britain, adders are rare in many local areas. More common in open countryside, such as heathland or moorland, away from towns. Very rare in gardens across much of England and Wales, except gardens adjoining nature reserves, large areas of favoured natural habitat such as heathland, or railway embankments. Grey, brown or reddish, with distinctive dark zig-zag markings from head to tail. Smaller than many people imagine. Usual length 40-70 cm.

Pet snakes — various species. Diverse colours and sizes. Most commonly found in urban areas. The corn snake, below, is one of the most commonly reported escapees.

Smooth snake. Very rare, and almost never found in gardens. Mainly limited to heathland nature reserves in Dorset, Hampshire and Surrey. Only found in parts of southern England; absent from Wales and Scotland. General colour grey-brown, with dark brown crown- or heart-shaped marking on top of the head, and dark bars or paired blotches along back. Usual length 45-55 cm.

The snake in my garden doesn’t look like a British snake. What is it, and what should I do?

It’s most likely to be an escaped pet, of which there are numerous kinds. Corn snakes, king snakes, garter snakes, pythons and boas are the most common. Pet snakes vary widely in size, colouration and behaviour. To help with identification, you could post a photo online, e.g. at iSpot (www.ispotnature.org). If you live in a heavily built-up area, it’s more likely you’ve seen a pet snake rather than a British snake. Most are harmless, but you should check before handling. Normally they haven’t moved far from their owner, although very occasionally pet snakes are deliberately released at remote locations.

The best course of action is for the snake to be captured and taken into captivity with a responsible keeper. Leaving the snake in a garden, or in the wild generally, can cause problems. Firstly the snake itself will be at risk (many pet snakes won’t thrive in Britain). Secondly the snake could pose a risk to our native wildlife. Thirdly it may prompt concern from others who encounter it.

ARC focuses on helping British snakes and so unfortunately we cannot help you with escaped pet snakes. There may be a welfare issue, so the RSPCA (www.rspca.org.uk, tel 0300 1234 555) or Scottish SPCA (www.scottishspca.org, tel 03000 999 999) may be able to help. You may also find other local animal welfare charities can help.
How do I arrange for a snake to be removed from my garden?

As we explain here, it is almost never appropriate to remove a snake from a garden. Many people contact us assuming that we regularly remove snakes. We understand it must be frustrating to hear that we don’t do this, especially when enquirers are referred from other organisations.

In fact, very few organisations are resourced to advise on snakes. We always try to help, and we hope the information here will help to resolve your concerns.

Grass snakes like this one are much more likely to visit your garden if you or a neighbour have areas of long grass.

Why is removing the snake from my garden unlikely to be helpful?

ARC receives many requests to do this. Whilst it may sound like a sensible idea at first, in fact there is very rarely any need to remove snakes from gardens. The snakes commonly found in gardens pose no risk to people or pets.

It is most likely that snakes are present in your local area, and that one has visited your garden temporarily. Even if it could be caught, removing it now won’t be very effective as it’s likely there are others nearby (although it’s most common for people to see snakes only sporadically unless they live right next to good snake habitat).

Snakes are often difficult to find and catch. Even if a snake expert visited your garden, there is no guarantee they could easily catch it.

It is normally best to learn a little more about snakes, and accept that just occasionally they may visit your garden. We find that many enquirers come to appreciate the snakes in their local area, although we do completely understand that some people will not feel like this.

Is it ever appropriate to remove snakes from gardens?

In very rare cases, yes. This could be the case when one of the following situations arises:

- There is a snake that has become disorientated and is “stranded” in a highly built-up area. Again, this rare because in most cases snakes easily navigate their way around the countryside, and occasionally visit gardens before returning.

- There is a snake that has been injured or has become trapped. This sometimes happens when snakes are harmed by people (which is illegal), or get caught in garden netting.

- There is an adder in a garden where young children or pets are playing. To emphasise, this is only an issue when it’s definitely an adder, which is rare. It’s potentially a problem where there are young children or pets because they can’t be relied upon not to touch or pick up the adder.

- There is an escaped pet snake. In this case, it’s best to be caught and re-homed (see below).
I’m sure there is an adder in my garden. What should I do?

The vast majority of adder reports in fact turn out to be grass snakes or slow-worms. It’s easy to misidentify them if you’ve seldom seen snakes, and there are lots of misconceptions about snakes (see “myths”, below).

If any of these points apply, you’ve probably seen a grass snake:

- It has yellow or white “collar” markings, with black blotches or a V mark, at the back of the head
- It’s swimming in a pond
- It’s over 90cm (3 ft) long, mainly green or olive-brown, with vertical black bars on the sides.

Adders are occasionally seen in gardens, but it is normally only when the garden is right next to a nature reserve or large area of land supporting favoured habitats, especially heathland. Other habitats where adders may be found include moorland, downland, railway embankments, bogs and sand dunes.

Generally speaking then, garden sightings of adders tend to be restricted to either (a) properties adjoining particular nature reserves, or (b) certain areas of the country with large expanses of excellent habitat, such as parts of south-west Scotland, coastal southern Wales, the North York Moors, and coastal Devon and Cornwall.

To be sure if you’ve seen an adder, you should check for the distinctive, dark zig-zag pattern along the snake’s back, from head to tail.

If you’re sure it’s an adder, bear in mind that there is no immediate risk. Adders only bite when threatened or provoked. When disturbed, adders normally move on, and it’s likely to be just passing through the garden.

If the adder is still in the garden, we suggest that you bring pets and children indoors as a precaution (though bites to people in gardens are exceptionally rare). If you allow the snake to move through the garden, it will probably leave of its own accord. If you think a risk of a bite remains, read through all of our advice here and seek further help if you wish.

How dangerous are adders?

Adders are venomous and yet the risk of being bitten is extremely low. Only around 100 bites to people are reported each year in Britain. Most bites occur in certain situations: people trying to pick up, move or harm an adder, or accidentally stepping on one. Clearly many of these bites are avoidable. Genuine accidents do occur, however, typically when a person steps on a snake while walking through long vegetation, wearing little on their feet.

Anyone who suspects an adder bite must seek urgent medical attention, even though most bites result in no long-term problems. Indeed, since 1876 there have been only 14 reported human deaths in Britain, and treatment has improved substantially. Nevertheless, many bites are extremely unpleasant in the short term, and some bites can be substantially more serious, even life-threatening, so all cases must be given prompt attention.

There are many misunderstandings about adder bites. We recommend an authoritative source such as the NHS advice: [http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Bites-snake/Pages/Introduction.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Bites-snake/Pages/Introduction.aspx)

Dogs are occasionally bitten, normally when they attempt to play with or bite the adder. It is uncommon, however, and vets in areas where adders occur are generally well-versed in treating bites. Contrary to popular opinion, the vast majority of dogs survive adder bites, and suffer no long-term effects.

To avoid your dog being bitten, keep it under control in areas where adders occur. If your dog is bitten, take it to a vet immediately. For more information, see our leaflet Dogs ‘n’ adders. Adder bites to cats, other pets, and livestock are exceptionally rare.
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Common myths about adders

Unfortunately there are plenty of myths about adders, which cause confusion for people understandably worried when they first see a snake. Here are some myths, along with the truth:

- “Adders build nests in gardens”. Incorrect: in fact, adders don’t build “nests” at all. They give birth to live young, and don’t create any specific structures to hide or breed in. Grass snakes, however, sometimes lay eggs in compost heaps in gardens; these aren’t really “nests”, but it may explain the confusion.
- “Adders are common across Britain”. Incorrect. Although adders do occur in all regions of Great Britain, in many local areas they are very rare. They are absent from entire counties, such as Hertfordshire, for example. In certain areas, adders can be locally abundant, but this tends to be in places with a low human population.
- “Adders normally grow to a metre long.” Incorrect. Adders rarely exceed 70cm in Britain.
- “Adders can be distinguished by a black “V” marking on the head.” Incorrect. Although adders normally do have a V or X marking on the head, it is not a useful distinguishing feature because grass snakes have a black mark on the neck which often looks like a V. Many grass snakes are misidentified as adders in this way.

Why are snakes protected by law?

All British snakes and lizards are legally protected. This means it is against the law to kill or injure them, and a conviction can mean stiff fines or even imprisonment. The law protects snakes because of concern about their declining numbers.

How can I encourage snakes to visit my garden more often?

You can make a big difference with some simple steps. Snakes usually visit gardens to take advantage of key habitat features — so why not do the following?

- Dig a wildlife pond in a sunny spot, and encourage amphibians such as frogs.
- Build a compost heap or grass cuttings heap in an undisturbed but sunny part of your garden. Keep it topped up with fresh material through summer.
- Leave a section of your garden to grow “wild”, with long grass and shrubs.
- Build a pile of logs or rocks for snakes to hide in and bask on top of.

For lots more advice, please see our leaflet Dragons in your garden.

I’ve found a snake trapped in netting. What should I do?

Snakes are easily caught in netting used to protect ponds, fruit and vegetables. Sadly they often die as a result.

Grass snake trapped in netting over a pond. Fine plastic netting can literally be a death-trap for snakes, but luckily ARC rescued this one just in time. Photo: Chris Dresh.

It is most likely to be a grass snake, and if you are confident that’s the case then you can carefully cut the snake free with nail scissors. If the snake appears healthy you can then release it, otherwise seek veterinary treatment. Then ensure you reduce the risk of further snake entanglements by either getting rid of netting altogether, using netting in a safer way, or using safe alternatives to netting. If you suspect the snake is an adder then it’s best to seek expert advice.

ARC’s leaflet Snakes and garden netting has lots more advice on this.
There’s a snake in my house or garage. What should I do?

Firstly, don’t panic, as the situation can be resolved easily. It’s rare for snakes to enter houses, but sometimes they enter when doors are left open in summer, or are brought in by cats.

It is most likely to be a grass snake or slow-worm, and if so there is no risk to people or pets. You can deal with the situation yourself by following the advice below. If you are not confident to deal with the situation yourself, ask a friend or contact an organisation such as the RSPCA. If you suspect it may be an adder or an escaped pet that could harm you (these are both extremely rare situations), then ensure all people and pets leave the room, close the door, and seek expert advice.

To resolve the situation yourself:

- The snake will normally either hide under furniture, or try to leave immediately. You can help it exit your house by closing doors to other rooms, and leaving the outside door open. Then either leave the snake to exit of its own accord, or gently encourage it to move by walking slowly towards it.

- If you are entirely confident that it is a harmless snake, you could encourage it to enter a large container such as a cardboard box held flush with the floor. Then release it in a safe place outside; we suggest the bottom of your garden or the nearest wildlife area (do not transport the snake far as it will become disorientated).

- If the snake hides, you may need to wait an hour or two for it to re-appear. Sometimes snakes hide in tight and/or dark spaces, such as underneath appliances. In this case you may need to spend a while carefully searching for it. If it’s actually trapped, e.g. in a cellar, then it will need rescuing.

- Snakes will normally exit garages of their own accord if you leave the door open.

- If snakes repeatedly enter the house or garage (which is unusual), remove possible shelter objects and keep vegetation very short, especially close to the doors.

Could the eggs in my compost heap be from a snake? What should I do?

Yes, this is possible. Grass snakes sometimes lay their eggs in compost heaps or grass piles. Each female grass snake lays 10-40 eggs in June-July. The eggs are white, leathery and 2-3 cm long. Often the eggs are clumped together.

The young snakes are about 17 cm long and very thin when they hatch out from late August to September. No other British snake lays eggs, and neither do slow-worms (though slow-worms often hide in compost heaps).

It’s normally safe to turn the compost carefully from mid-October; try to avoid turning it over summer if you can. Keep the heap topped up with fresh material in summer, as this creates more warmth, which in turn helps incubate the eggs.

If you find the snakes especially worrying, you could use a sealed compost bin instead of an open heap. We encourage you to leave the snakes to breed in an open heap, though, they are harmless and their natural habitat is shrinking.

A grass snake with eggs. Note the elongated shape of the eggs. It’s unusual to see the mother and eggs together like this, as the eggs are normally hidden inside the compost heap. The mother may be seen basking on or near the compost heap from late May onwards, and then after laying eggs in June-July she may leave the area. If you have a large compost heap and your garden is surrounded by excellent habitat, you may be lucky enough to have several female snakes laying eggs in your compost. Photo: Neal Armour-Chelu.
How do I discourage snakes from visiting my garden?

Whilst we urge you to look favourably on snakes, we recognise that some people simply do not like them. In rare cases, people suffer from a phobia, or intense fear, of snakes. For some people the fear arises because of experience overseas, in a country with many venomous snakes.

If you find snakes intolerable it is normally much better to discourage them rather than try to remove them. The following will make it much less likely that snakes will visit your garden:

- Keep the grass cut very short.
- Remove features of interest for snakes, such as ponds, compost heaps, and materials stored on the ground (wood, stones, bricks etc.)
- Fill in any crevices in paving slabs, pond edging, rockeries, shed bases and stone walls.
- Seal off the garden by making a solid barrier all the way around — blocking up any gaps in fences, or erecting a new fence.

If your next-door neighbour has an overgrown or wildlife-friendly garden, it’s more likely that a snake will visit your garden. Sealing off your garden can help. If the neighbour’s garden is abandoned then arranging for it to be tidied up will reduce snake visits.

Clearly these actions will make gardens poor for wildlife in general, so we only recommend them as a last resort. If you do remove key features, please do it sensitively. In most cases, simply keeping the grass mown will substantially reduce snake visits.

What can I do about snakes eating my fish, frogs or toads?

Grass snakes sometimes visit gardens to feed on frogs, toads or newts in ponds. This is natural and nothing to be concerned about. It would be very unusual for grass snakes to have a serious impact on natural prey animals like frogs.

Grass snakes may eat fish but it’s unlikely they will take many (snakes can go for weeks without food, and don’t eat many fish in a year). However, if you are especially concerned about your fish, then you could discourage snakes from visiting your garden (see above). In addition you could ensure there are no crevices among stones and filter/pump equipment around the pond edge, bury the edges of your pond liner, remove any nearby objects that snakes can hide under, and keep vegetation around the pond very short. Please note that netting over ponds will not deter snakes from visiting, and often results in them being entangled (see above).

Slow-worms are lizards, but frequently mistaken for snakes. They don’t move far, and prefer mature gardens. Slow-worms are rarely spotted in the open, and tend to be found in long grass or when tidying the garden, removing debris or lifting paving.
What else can I do to help snakes?

Aside from managing your garden to help snakes, you could:

**Become an ARC Friend.** By signing up you will be supporting our work to conserve snakes. As an ARC Friend you’ll get newsletters and entry to special events. Please see: [www.arc-trust.org/become-a-friend](http://www.arc-trust.org/become-a-friend). Alternatively you can help by making a [donation](http://www.arc-trust.org/become-a-friend) or buying one of our [gifts](http://www.arc-trust.org/become-a-friend).

**Join a local volunteer group.** There are many county-based Amphibian and Reptile Groups, who can help you to make a difference for snakes locally. See [www.arguk.org](http://www.arguk.org).

**Send us your snake sightings.** This helps us to better understand where snakes live and the threats they face. You can easily submit sightings using our online recording tool, the Record Pool: [www.recordpool.org.uk](http://www.recordpool.org.uk). If you’d like to spend more time on a detailed survey, you could join in with our National Amphibian and Reptile Recording Scheme. See: [www.narrs.org.uk](http://www.narrs.org.uk).

Leaflet compiled by Jim Foster, based on information in the “Frequently Asked Questions” section of ARC’s website. Photos by Jim Foster unless otherwise credited. Thanks to Angela Reynolds, Kim Boughey and Helen Wraight for comments.

If you have any suggestions for improving this leaflet, please let us know by email at: enquiries@arc-trust.org

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