

Spring and Summer Scales: our Reptile Neighbours

Consultant ecologist Chris Cathrine, founder and director of Caledonian Conservation Ltd., an organisation which provides expert ecology and ornithology services for development and conservation projects in the UK, introduces us to some local wildlife 'best enjoyed from a respectful distance'!

As soon as the weather begins to turn after winter, we feel excited - spring is on the way, and nature is getting in to gear for another year. A plethora of wildlife cues brings joy to people at this time of year: growing wildflowers, the return of migratory birds, bats waking from hibernation, frogs spawning, toads calling... However, for me, one of the earliest and most exhilarating signs of spring is the emergence of reptiles from hibernation.

In Scotland, we have four native reptile species: common lizard (*Zootoca vivipara*), slow-worm (*Anguis fragilis*), adder (*Vipera berus*), and grass snake (*Natrix sp.*). The first three species are definitely found locally to Doune and Deanston; the grass snake may be present as well but occurs at low population densities in Scotland and so is rarely spotted.

Although populations of reptiles can be found throughout the area, NatureScot's Flanders Moss National Nature Reserve is a fantastic place where you have a good chance of spotting common lizards basking on the boardwalk, and perhaps catch a glimpse of an adder coiled in the sun, partially covered by vegetation adjacent to the path. Slow-worms have also been recorded at Flanders Moss, although these legless lizards are more difficult to spot, being fossorial in habit (they're burrowers) and most often found under stones or discarded objects. Flanders Moss is renowned for its great natural history value, as the largest lowland raised bog remaining in Europe, supporting not just reptiles, but many species of moorland birds and peatland specialists such as various plants and invertebrates - including the rare bog sun-jumper spider (*Heliophanus dampfi*).

Our fourth native reptile, the grass snake, is perhaps the rarest reptile in Scotland. Until recently, the distribution of the grass snake wasn't thought to extend northwards beyond the border with England. However, animals don't recognise political boundaries and so it is perhaps unsurprising that this snake has since been confirmed to occur in Scotland. Most records are from Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders; however there are a few further north, including in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park. Unlike our other three native reptiles, which give birth to live young, the grass snake lays eggs, and so its distribution will be limited by the availability of suitable egg laying sites offering a stable temperature, such as compost piles and manure heaps.

Reptiles often hibernate communally, and generally emerge between February and April. Initially, they tend to remain near their hibernation site and, as the weather is cool, they may bask for lengthy periods of time throughout the day; this means that April and May are the ideal time to spot them. During this period they will mate, before dispersing widely for the rest of summer before returning to hibernate at the same site again in September or October. After May,

when the weather becomes warmer and the sun rises earlier, reptiles only need to bask briefly after dawn; they are then active and often hidden by vegetation for the remainder of the day, making them difficult to spot, although cool overcast weather can improve one's chances.

Reptiles are best enjoyed from a respectful distance. All of our native reptiles are protected by law from intentional or reckless harm; they are delicate and should not be handled. Furthermore, the adder is venomous but bites only if provoked and, unless the person bitten is allergic to the venom, the result is not life threatening, although medical attention should be sought as soon as possible.

Reptiles are under-recorded in Scotland. Record Pool, an online recording platform set up in partnership between Amphibian and Reptile Groups of the UK and Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust, aims to help address this by making it easy for anyone to record sightings <https://www.recordpool.org.uk/>. If you would like to learn more about reptiles, check out Central Scotland Amphibian and Reptile Group <https://www.arguk.org/> and the Stirling and Clackmannanshire Scottish Wildlife Trust Group <https://www.swtstirling.org.uk/>. In addition, there is a lot of information available about Scottish grass snakes at the Caledonian Conservation Ltd web page <https://www.caledonianconservation.co.uk/>.

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For a Scottish Wildlife Trust talk on Scotland's reptiles and amphibians by Chris Cathrine, go to https://youtu.be/IUMkIkFMq_0



The grass snake, perhaps Scotland's rarest reptile. Photo courtesy of John Baker.