

Species Action Plan

Reptiles



Adder © John Archer

“The gardeners employed at villas close to the metropolis occasionally raise an alarm, and profess to have seen a viper in the shrubberies...” (Jefferies, 1893).

1. Aims

- To protect and conserve the native reptile populations of Greater London.
- To save the adder from its imminent extinction in Greater London.
- To promote wider awareness of reptile conservation in Greater London.

2. Introduction

The common lizard *Lacerta vivipara*, slow-worm *Anguis fragilis* (a legless lizard) and two snakes, the grass snake *Natrix natrix* and adder *Vipera berus*, all occur in Greater London. Whilst the lizards and grass snake are still fairly widespread, adders are exceedingly rare in London, and are found at only a handful of sites.

Being cold-blooded, reptiles need warm sites for basking to raise their body temperature. The open, dry nature of heathlands, and chalk and acid grasslands often provide these basking areas, as well as plenty of cover and food, and are the habitats with which most reptiles are commonly associated. The exception is the grass snake, which has more affinity with wetland habitats.

British reptiles are inactive between mid-October and March, hibernating below ground in disused mammal burrows, inside buried stonework, deep within grass tussocks or among tree roots. On emergence from hibernation in the spring, they can often be seen basking in the open. Slow-worms and common lizards live mostly on invertebrates – insects, spiders and small slugs and snails. The two snakes hunt by

stealth, preying on amphibians, small mammals and even their smaller reptilian cousins.

People sometimes see adders as a threat, as they are the only venomous snake in Britain. However, bites to humans are extremely uncommon. Our use and abuse of the places where adders occur presents a far greater threat to them than they pose to us.

3. Current Status

Adder Adders are now very rare in Greater London, although they are more frequent in some of the surrounding counties. The places where adders are known to still occur in London may be counted on one hand, and their numbers at all of these are worryingly low. Their rapid decline heralds imminent extinction locally unless conservation action is quickly put into effect. This plan does not identify their remaining sites because of the continued threat of persecution of snakes by misguided individuals.

Grass Snake Grass snakes are locally common in many outer London boroughs, but populations are declining as a result of habitat fragmentation and loss of wetland sites to development. This, our largest snake, is easily identified by its yellow collar, which is a prominent feature even in hatchlings. Being highly mobile, grass snakes are possibly over-recorded and can turn up almost anywhere, but may be found typically in undisturbed habitats in river corridors. In gardens they are often seen around ponds, preying on frogs and toads, and in compost heaps where they seek the warmth of the decaying plant matter to incubate their eggs.

Common Lizard Common lizards are widespread across the Capital, mainly occurring in outer London boroughs. Isolated populations may occur in more central locations, especially along potential wildlife corridors such as railway embankments.

Slow-worm Slow-worms are also widespread in London but similarly concentrated in the outer London boroughs. Isolated populations are found on inner London sites where suitable habitats exist. Slow worm and common lizard often occur on railsides and road verges, allotments, wasteland or 'brownfield' sites and in private gardens where grass has been allowed to grow long.

4. Specific Factors Affecting the Species

4.1 Loss of suitable habitat and changes in land use

Development and unsympathetic land management has reduced the amount of habitat available for reptiles. This has been especially true for adders. Essentially, reptiles require habitat with good structural diversity, which provides basking areas, adequate feeding opportunities and hibernation sites. These features are often reduced through intensive mowing, over-grazing, burning (accidental or deliberate), or intensive recreational use.

4.2 Isolation of populations

Reptile populations have become isolated from one another as well as from areas of habitat which they could potentially colonise. Isolation occurs through fragmentation

of suitable habitats by the creation of barriers that reptiles cannot cross. These include such obvious physical barriers as major roads or urban development, but can also comprise more subtle barriers such as ploughed fields or expanses of short mown grass. It is likely that isolated populations will gradually decline through inbreeding and susceptibility to disease, predation or persecution. Isolated populations in urban areas may be particularly vulnerable to predators such as cats and crows.

4.3 Persecution

Snakes have long been persecuted. Their 'poisonous' reputation sustains an enduring media image portraying all snakes as villainous and lethal predators of man. The adder, grass snake and slow-worm (which is often mistaken for a snake) suffer from this negative image.

Although the intentional killing or injury of any native reptile is illegal, persecution may still be a significant cause of decline for many reptile species in London, particularly the adder.

4.4 Liability

Some land managers have been known to over-react to concerns for public safety and the potential danger to domestic pets from adder bites. Consequent action to remove the perceived threat by destroying suitable reptile habitat, and/or illegal killing, may have contributed to local declines in adder populations (and possibly grass snakes and slow-worms where these have been mis-identified as adders). Conservation action combined with a careful campaign aimed at raising awareness of their dire status could serve to improve the public image of the adder and snakes in general.

5 Current Action

5.1 Legal status

All British reptiles are protected to various degrees by the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981 (as amended). London's reptiles are protected from intentional killing and injury, selling or other forms of trade. Damage to their habitats is not specifically referred to as a prohibited action. However, as it may be argued that premeditated habitat destruction would amount to an intentional attempt to kill or injure any resident reptiles, their immediate habitat at least, is protected indirectly by the Act.

Many important reptile habitats are protected by virtue of their status as a statutory Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) or Local or National Nature Reserve (LNR, NNR). Others are safeguarded from inappropriate development through designation as a non-statutory Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC).

5.2 Mechanisms targeting the species

These current actions are ongoing. They need to be supported and continued in addition to the new action listed under Section 6.

5.2.1 Planning guidance

The presence of protected species (including all native reptiles) is a material consideration which must be addressed by local planning authorities when

considering a development proposal which would be likely to result in harm to a species or its habitat.

5.2.2 Awareness-raising and survey

The London, Essex and Hertfordshire Amphibian and Reptile Trust (LEHART), Surrey Amphibian and Reptile Group (SARG) and Kent Reptile and Amphibian Group (Krag) undertake surveys, provide advice on habitat management, and promote reptile conservation in London. They maintain databases of site records.

Other organisations such as the London Wildlife Trust, Froglife and English Nature produce information notes and leaflets about reptiles and their conservation. Recent public awareness campaigns to 'Be Kind To Snakes' have attempted to change the image of reptiles, and popular interest is slowly growing.

6. Objectives, Actions and Targets

Most of these actions are specific to this species. However, there are other, broader actions that apply generically to a number of habitats and species. These are located in a separate 'Generic Action' section, which should be read in conjunction with this document. There are generic actions for Site Management, Habitat Protection, Species Protection, Ecological Monitoring, Biological Records, Communications and Funding.

Please note that the partners identified in the tables are those that have been involved in the process of forming the plan. It is not an exclusive list and new partners are both welcomed and needed. The leads identified are responsible for co-ordinating the actions – but are not necessarily implementers.

Objective 1 Update knowledge of reptile distribution in London, particularly in respect of adders

Target: Publish updated Herpetofauna Atlas of London by 2005

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Use existing adder records to identify priority sites where surveys should be undertaken	2002	LEHART	LNHS, Krag, GLA, SARG, LWT, Site managers
Undertake reptile surveys on these sites	2005	EN	LEHART, Krag, SARG, Site managers
Include reptile tick-box (or other, as appropriate) in public surveys of garden biodiversity	2002	LWT	EN, LA
Publish an updated Herpetofauna Atlas for Greater London	2005	LEHART	LNHS, Krag, SARG, EN

Objective 2 To promote reptile conservation to landowners, land managers and the general public

Target: Produce and disseminate reptile conservation advice notes by 2003

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Produce advice note on reptile conservation issues for planners and developers	2003	GLA	EN, LEHART, KRAG, SARG, HCT
Produce habitat management 'best practice' guidelines for site managers	2003	LEHART	KRAG, SARG, EN, HCT, GLA
Update and reproduce existing leaflets on reptiles for general public (i.e. Wildlife Facts and LEHART's Species Fact sheets)	2003	EN	LWT, LEHART, GLA

Objective 3 To maintain a viable adder population in London

Target: Ensure management is in place to maintain viable adder populations at existing sites by 2005 and at other sites by 2007

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Determine extent of adder populations on known sites and secure appropriate management to conserve and extend suitable habitat	2005	LEHART	EN, Site managers
Produce statement on the future of adders in London	2005	EN	LNHS, LEHART, KRAG, SARG
Identify possible re-introduction sites	2006	LEHART	EN, GLA, Ecologists
Secure appropriate management on potential re-introduction sites	2007	EN	LEHART, Site managers

Relevant Action Plans

London Plans

Heathland; Chalk Grassland; Wasteland; Acid Grassland; Churchyards and Cemeteries; Railway Linesides, Ponds, Lakes & Reservoirs; Private Gardens.

National Plans

Lowland Heathland; Lowland Dry Acid Grassland; Lowland Calcareous Grassland.

Key References

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JNCC (1998). *Herpetofauna Worker's Manual*.

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Abbreviations

EN – English Nature

GLA – Greater London Authority

HCT – Herpetofauna Conservation Trust

LA – Local Authorities

LEHART – London, Essex and Hertfordshire
Amphibian and Reptile Trust

LNHS – London Natural History Society

LWT – London Wildlife Trust

KRAG – Kent Reptile and Amphibian Group

SARG – Surrey Amphibian and Reptile Group

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