

SNAKES

Hot summer weather means that sightings of snakes become more likely and encounters between pets and snakes more common. In the UK there are 3 species of snake and 1 species of lizard that looks like a snake.

Adder

Only the adder (member of the viper family) is venomous and can pose a risk to humans and pets. An adder is a relatively short chunky snake, usually between 50-60cms long, with a large head. Their colour varies; males can be shades of grey, yellow or green, whilst the females are more red-brown in colour. All have a distinct zigzag pattern along their back, which is more defined in the male, and all have a black underside. Adders have a distinctive elliptical, slit pupil which identifies them as venomous. Adders are not found in Ireland.

Adders hibernate through the winter and start to appear from March onwards. They bask in sunshine to get their body temperature up so that they can hunt. Adders generally only bite when provoked but this can occur accidentally when they are cold and sluggish and more likely to be trodden on or picked up by a passing dog or cat. Not all adder bites result in envenomation but when they do they are serious.

Dogs most commonly get bitten by adders and often the bite is to their muzzle, face or feet. If envenomation occurs the bite is very painful and severe swelling starts within a few minutes. The swelling slowly spreads and the area may become very bruised. Depending on the severity of the bite a dog may pant, drool or vomit, even have seizures or collapse and go into shock. Adder bites can be fatal if not treated; death can be soon after the bite or a few days later from organ failure.

Fortunately with prompt veterinary treatment most dogs will survive an adder bite. Treatment usually consists of anti-venom, painkillers, antibiotics and intravenous fluids. Often the pet will need to stay in hospital for 24-48hrs. If you ever think your pet

may have been bitten by a snake call the surgery straight away; even if initially they seem OK.

Grass snake

This is a large snake, on average 1 metre long, sometimes up to 2 metres. They are grey green with black spots, a light coloured collar and a pale underside. They have round pupils identifying them as non venomous. They live in damp habitats and swim well, doing most of their hunting under water.

Smooth snake

These are very rare. They are constrictors and pounce quickly on their prey before subduing them by squeezing them and then swallowing them whole. On average they are about 60cm long and are slender with flat scales, grey-brown in colour with round pupils and orange eyes.

Slow worms

These are legless lizards but do look snake like. They are about 40cm long and are relatively common in gardens – often falling prey to cats. Slow worms are smooth and shiny with an indistinct head. They vary in colour but are usually a shade of grey, brown or blue. Females are browner in colour and have a stripe along their back. As with other lizards slow worms will shed their tail if caught; the front end survives and grows a new tail. They also have eyelids, differentiating them from a snake.

All snakes and slow worms are protected from being killed, injured or sold by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

If you think you have found an adder do not attempt to move or to kill it, it is illegal and dangerous.