

## Grass snake *Natrix helvetica*



The grass snake, sometimes referred to as the barred grass snake, is the only native snake species found in the Channel Islands, and within these is only found in Jersey. It is found throughout northwest Europe, and similar species are found as far south as northern Africa, and to the west deep in to Russia.



**Size** – Males are smaller than females, reaching approximately 70–80 cm in length, whereas mature females can grow to 80–100 cm. As well as being longer, females can often be distinguished from males due to a wider jaw. Hatchlings are 15–20 cm long.

**Features** – The grass snake is often olive, brown or green in colour and typically has a distinctive yellow collar on the neck with black crescents behind it. They also have black barring along the body, and a black and white checkerboard pattern on the belly. Aside from the smooth belly, most other scales are keeled, meaning they have a small ridge in the centre of each one. Though they are non-venomous, the grass snake can produce a distasteful musk as a deterrent to potential predators. In some instances they will also play dead. As they grow, snakes shed their skins. The grass snake normally sheds its skin in one piece, which appears translucent and has a papery texture

**Habitat** – Grass snakes occupy a number of habitats, and typically have an affinity for wetland habitats, rough grassland, scrub, heathland, open woodland and many others. In Jersey, though rare, they are more commonly found in the west and southwest of the island where there is less habitat disturbance. To nest, females often utilise heaps of rotting organic material, including man-made compost and manure heaps. Hibernation takes place underground such as amongst tree roots or within mammal burrows and other holes they can secrete themselves within that are protected from frost and flooding.

**Feeding** – They are non-venomous, and primarily feed on amphibians, but are also known to feed on mammals, reptiles, birds and invertebrates.

**Activity & Reproduction** – The active season normally occurs between March and October, hibernating away from the cold for the rest of the year. They are able to move fairly large distances in search of food and other resources. Mating takes place between early April and June, with many males often pursuing a single female which can result in a breeding ball of males entwined with the female. Egg-laying normally takes place from the beginning of June to the beginning of August in warm, damp places such as compost heaps. Each snake may lay 10 or more eggs around 3cm in length, with larger females producing up to 40 eggs. The texture of these eggs is like parchment, and those in a clutch appear glued together. Hatching occurs after 2–3 months of incubation between mid-August and the beginning of September.



The grass snake is protected by the Conservation of Wildlife (Jersey) Law 2000.

Photo credits: Rob Ward