Charlie Elder has a close encounter with an adder – Britain's only venomous snake and an animal under threat

Coiled adder on the moor stops me in my tracks

NOTHING halts you in your tracks on a walk like an adder.

I was exploring a boggy area of Dartmoor, stepping between tussocks of sedge and heather as I negotiated a particularly marshy stretch, when I spotted the snake coiled up on a sunny patch of moss close to cover.

Well camouflaged, I would certainly have trodden on it if I hadn’t been carefully watching where I placed my feet to avoid sinking in the quagmire.

I managed to take a quick photo and step back before it slipped away into a thicket of vegetation.

Muddy brown, with the tell-tale dark zig-zag down its back, it wasn’t particularly large, but striking nonetheless. I so seldom see snakes in Britain that they can seem like mythical creatures – and the adders I have come across have been in far drier areas of the moor or along the South West coast path, so it was a surprise to come across one in a damp mire.

The adder is typically a species of free-draining soils and open habitats such as heathland, moorland, sea cliffs and open woodland, where it feeds mainly on lizards and rodents.

Dartmoor has a healthy population of adders, but one probably wouldn’t know it as they tend to keep well out of sight – being easiest to spot in the spring when they emerge from hibernation and bask in the sun.

And a little perspective is needed when it comes to the danger this protected species poses. Yes, the adder – also known as the viper – is venomous (our other two native snake species – the grass snake and smooth snake – are not), but they are not aggressive and records of bites are rare. Inquisitive dogs are more at risk of a nip than people.

The charity Amphibian and Reptile Conservation says that in 70% of cases the reaction to a bite is negligible and localised, though it can prove serious. The advice is not to apply a tourniquet or try to cut or suck the venom out – instead anyone bitten should remain calm and seek medical attention.

The last person in Britain to die from an adder bite was in 1975, and there have only been 14 human deaths attributed to adders since 1876. Statistically speaking, when going for a country walk cattle and lightning are far more dangerous.

My adder sighting certainly felt lucky (some might not use quite the same term!) as they are secretive creatures and have been suffering a long-term...
population decline in Britain, put down to habitat loss and fragmentation as well as human disturbance and persecution.

Research by the University of Reading, published in March, suggests that if their downward trend continues they could eventually be restricted to just a few sites within twenty years, or even lost altogether.

The research data was collected over the last 11 years as part of Make The Adder Count citizen science surveys carried out by local reptile and amphibian groups.

“Our analysis shows that 90 per cent of the sites surveyed have small populations, and on average these small populations are declining,” said researcher Dr Emma Gardner. “When surveyors visit these sites, they typically record fewer than ten adders. Only ten per cent of sites have large populations, which seem to be doing okay.

“If these trends continue, adders will become restricted to just a few sites in the UK, significantly increasing the extinction risk for this priority species in Britain.”

Climate change could also have an impact. While reptiles are warmth-loving creatures, the adder is well adapted to cold conditions, and is found in northern Scotland and even above the Arctic Circle in Scandinavia. Milder winters mean they have for the first time been reported as active during every month of the year in Europe - which could make them vulnerable at times when they should be hibernating.

Whether you like adders or find them sinister, few animals make for such attention-grabbing and memorable encounters – however brief.

My adder didn’t reappear, despite me waiting patiently, so I headed on across the moor, eyes glued to the ground every step of the way...

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