

**Zeitschrift:** Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Society of New Zealand  
**Band:** 76 (2010)  
**Heft:** [8]

**Artikel:** Kreuzotter = Vipera berus  
**Autor:** [s.n.]  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-944230>

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Magazine for Members of the Swiss Society of New Zealand Inc

## FAUNA IN SWITZERLAND

### Kreuzotter - *Vipera berus*



Vipera berus, the common European viper, is a venomous viper species that is extremely widespread and can be found throughout most of Western Europe and all the way to Far East Asia. It is not regarded as highly dangerous. The snake is not aggressive and usually only bites when alarmed or disturbed; people are generally only bitten after stepping on it or attempting to pick it up. It will usually disappear into the undergrowth at a hint of any danger, but will return once all is quiet, often to the same spot. Bites can be very painful, but are seldom fatal. The last snake bite fatality in Switzerland was recorded in 1961; in the 50 years since, over 20.000 people would have died in car accidents in Switzerland. Even so, professional medical help should always be sought as soon as possible after a bite.

The Kreuzotter feeds on small mammals, birds, lizards, amphibians and in some cases on spiders, worms and insects. Females breed once every two or three years with litters usually born in late summer to early autumn in the Northern hemisphere. The Kreuzotter, like most other vipers, is ovoviparous, which means that the young develop inside eggs that are retained within the mother's body until they are ready to hatch. The young are usually born encased in a transparent sac from which they must free themselves. The neonates, measuring 14 to 23 cm, are born with a fully functional venom apparatus and a reserve supply of yolk within their bodies. They shed their skins for the first time within a day or two. Females do not appear to take much interest in their offspring, but the young have been observed to remain near their mothers for several days after birth. Litters range from 3 to 20.

Adults grow to a length of 60 to 90 centimetres. Most have some kind of zigzag dorsal pattern down

the entire length of the body and tail. Females are usually brownish in hue with dark-brown markings, while the males are pure grey with black markings.



Kreuzotter – *Vipera berus*

Males find females by following their scent trails, sometimes tracking them for hundreds of meters a day. If a female is found and flees, the male follows. Courtship involves side-by-side parallel "flowing" behavior, tongue flicking along the back and excited lashing of the tail. Pairs stay together for one or two days after mating. Males chase away their rivals and engage in combat, culminating in the dramatic "adder dance": In this act, the males confront each other, raise up the front part of the body vertically, make swaying movements and attempt to push each other to the ground. This is repeated until one of the two becomes exhausted and crawls off to find another mate.

*from Wikipedia*