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HELVE⁺RIA

Magazine for Members of the Swiss Society of New Zealand Inc

FAUNA IN SWITZERLAND

Grass snake - Ringelnatter



The grass snake (*Natrix natrix*) is a European nonvenomous snake. It is often found near water and feeds almost exclusively on amphibians.



Grass snake

The grass snake is typically dark green or brown with a characteristic yellow collar behind the head, (hence the name Ringelnatter). The underside is whitish with irregular blocks of black. Females are considerably larger than males, typically reaching a size of 90-110 centimetres when fully grown. Males are approximately 20 centimetres shorter. Weight is about 240 grams.

They prey almost entirely on amphibians, especially the common toad and the common frog, although they may also occasionally eat mammals and fish. Captive snakes have been observed taking earthworms offered by hand, but dead prey items are never taken. The snake will search actively for prey, often on the edges of water, using sight and sense of smell. They consume prey live without using constriction. They may range widely, moving up to several hundred metres in a day. Prey items tend to be large compared to the size of the snake. Snakes which have recently eaten will stay in one location, basking to optimize their body temperature until the prey item has

been digested. Individual snakes may only need two or three significant feeds in an entire season.

Grass snakes are strong swimmers and may be found close to fresh water. The preferred habitat appears to be open woodland and "edge" habitat such as field margins and woodland borders as these may offer adequate refuge while still affording ample opportunity for thermoregulation through basking.

Grass snakes need to overwinter in areas which are not subject to freezing. Thus they typically spend the winter underground where the temperature is relatively stable.

As spring approaches, the males emerge first and spend much of the day basking in an effort to raise body temperature and thereby metabolism to maximise sperm production. They mate with the females as soon as they emerge up to 2 weeks later. The leathery-skinned eggs are laid in batches of 8-40 in June to July and hatch after about 10 weeks. To survive and hatch the eggs require a temperature of at least 21 °C (70 °F), but preferably 28 °C (82 °F), with high humidity. Rotting vegetation such as compost heaps are preferred locations. The young are about 18 centimetres long when they hatch and are immediately independent.

Ecdysis (moulting) occurs at least once during the active season. As the outer skin wears and the snake grows, the skin loosens from the body, including from the eyes, which may turn a milky white colour at this time. This presumably affects the eyesight of the snake and they do not move or hunt during this time. The outer skin is eventually sloughed in one piece (inside-out) and normal movement activity is resumed.

Not being venomous, the snake's only defence is to produce a garlic-smelling fluid from the anal glands, or to feign death by becoming completely limp. They may also perform an aggressive display in defence, hissing and striking without actually opening the mouth. They rarely bite in defence. They may also secrete blood from the mouth and nose whilst playing dead.

The species has various predator species, including storks, owls and perhaps other birds of prey, foxes and the domestic cat.