

Natrix natrix (grass snake): Pale coloration

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The general coloration of grass snakes in Britain has been described as olive-green or olive-brown (Smith, 1964; Appleby, 1971; Beebee & Griffiths, 2000; Inns, 2009) although descriptions extend to include olive-grey (Smith, 1964), grey (Beebee & Griffiths, 2000) or grey-green (Inns, 2009). In the Sandlings of East Suffolk there has been a series of sightings of pale-coloured grass snakes that could be described as grey-green, but which appear distinctly different to conspecifics found elsewhere in the county. In 2007 two pale hatchlings were found on farmland bordering the River Alde near Snape, one of which is illustrated here (Fig. 1a). Two adult grass snakes with similar coloration were found in woodland near to Sudbourne, one photographed by Neal Armour-Chelu in 2007 (Fig. 1b), the other by Jamie Peters in 2009 (Fig. 1c). More recently (1 June 2014) Mark Jones found a pale-coloured juvenile, probably a one-year-old (33 cm total length), on the outskirts of Aldeburgh (Fig. 1d).

All of these snakes had dark markings and none had the pink eyes of an albino, yet most of them showed indications of hypomelanism. The bars and spots on the bodies of the younger snakes were fainter than normal giving them a lemon-yellow tint. Jamie Peters' snake from Sudbourne had a pink tongue (Fig. 1c). One of the hatchlings from Snape and the juvenile from Aldeburgh both had brown tongues, in contrast with the black, normally coloured tongue of the other Snape hatchling (Fig. 1a).

Pale coloured grass snakes have been found at two other

locations; there have been two sightings in Epping Forest (e.g. plate 38 in Vaughan, 2014) and one in Cannock Chase (Mike Potts, pers. comm.) but otherwise this coloration appears highly unusual. The snakes described here were all found within a 4 km radius suggesting a relatively localised nature of this colour variation within Suffolk. It would be interesting to know whether there are clusters of similarly coloured grass snakes elsewhere.

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Fig. 1a. Hatchling from Snape showing black tongue (John Baker). **Fig. 1b.** Adult from Sudbourne (Neil Armour-Chelu). **Fig. 1c** Second adult from Sudbourne showing pink tongue (Jamie Peters). **Fig. 1d.** Juvenile from Aldeburgh showing brown tongue (John Goldsmith/Kevin Simmonds).