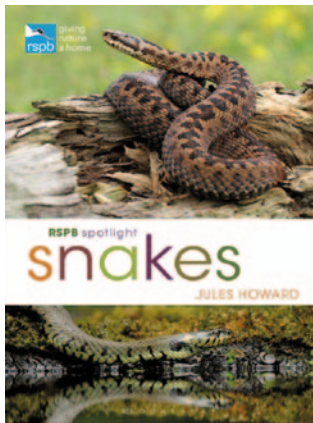


RSPB Spotlight Snakes

Howard, Jules

Bloomsbury Wildlife, 2020, ISBN 10: 1472971698 ISBN 13: 9781472971692, 128 pp.



The RSPB Spotlight series of books claims to introduce readers to the lives and behaviours of our favourite animals with eye catching colour photographs and informative expert text. Jules Howard's recent volume on snakes certainly achieves that claim and a lot more.

My inclination as a naturalist with an almost exclusive focus on British wildlife is to want, from the first page, to dive

into the detail of the British species but Jules spends the first twenty pages or so taking us through the broader diverse world of snakes to build our understanding before we meet the residents. Our three native species are then described in expert detail, accompanied by some excellent representative photographs with a nice blend of wild and staged shots. The writing in this section is a great blend of essential description and personal anecdote and I was particularly jealous of Jules' account of his encounter with a one and a half metre grass snake. Of the many British snakes I've seen, I've only encountered a few that exceeded one metre and even then not by much. The species accounts also spend several pages on the slow worm and given the aim of the Spotlight series as an introduction to the topic of snakes, this is welcome as the slow worm so easily tempts less experienced observers to think it is a snake. Jules also provides some useful information and photographs of non-native species and the escapees which are increasingly encountered in urban settings.

On first read I was a little surprised to have got through the British species with so much of the book still to go. However, reading on, it is clear that this book is so much more than a field guide and the subsequent chapters started to add additional layers of information, all geared to our native species, about annual cycle, thermoregulation, feeding, mating and giving birth all brilliantly illustrated with some stunning photography. The topic of snakes then really broadens out further in a superbly entertaining way through the challenges they face, the historic cultural perspective, how snakes have been exploited and vilified including even the damaging way that snakes are presented in current films. This part of the book offers some great and engaging narrative

again accompanied but some highly relevant illustrations.

A few things the book left me with.

First, it's one of the first publications I've read that's referred to the grass snake by its new name of barred grass snake since the elevation of *Natrix natrix helvetica* from subspecies to species (*Natrix helvetica*) (Fritz & Kindler, 2017). Whilst this felt a little unfamiliar, precision is important.

Secondly, seeing the estimate of 20,000 as the number of snakes that snake-catcher Brusher Mills was calculated as having removed from the New Forest in twenty years leading up to his death in 1905 was shocking. Coupled with the fact there were a further two generations of snake catchers after him it makes you realise just what an amazing place the New Forest must have been in late Victorian times especially if you couple those statistics with the Victorian reports of the dense and varied butterfly populations that existed there at that time.

Thirdly (and sadly) the term Jules uses of 'death by a thousand cuts' is such an appropriate way to describe the relentless combination of things, from climate change, roads, 'concrete-isation' right through to disturbance by over-zealous photographers that stand in the way of maintaining viable, wild populations of snakes in the Britain. Let's hope that the interest generated by this book and the advice given in the last few pages about how to get involved and help goes some way to mitigating some of those thousand cuts.

This is a brilliant and informative book written by a skilled communicator and well worth owning in its own right or as part of the rest of the Spotlight series.

REFERENCE

Fritz, U. & Kindler C. (2017) A very European tale – Britain still has only three snake species, but its grass snake is now assigned to another species. *The Herpetological Bulletin* 141: 44-45.

HOWARD INNS

Newstead Lodge, Hill Road, Farnham, Surrey, GU10 3QW

Email; howardinns@hotmail.com

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