

## A NEW RECORD OF THE AESCUPLAPIAN SNAKE, *ELAPHE LONGISSIMA* (LAURENTI), FROM THE PLEISTOCENE OF BRITAIN

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The Aesculapian snake, *Elaphe longissima*, is a large, slender constrictor that presently occurs from southwestern Europe eastward into Turkey and northern Iran. Isolated records, north of the continuous range of the species, exist in Germany (Arnold and Burton, 1978, map 112). Ditmars (1931) referred to the allegation that *Elaphe longissima* was brought into Europe by the Romans to be kept in temples erected to Aesculapius, the god of medicine, and that the isolated records of this species in Germany reflected these introductions.

The fossil record, however, shows that during the warmer periods of the Quaternary, *Elaphe longissima* invaded areas far north of its present range on the European continent (Szyndlar, 1984) and in Britain (Holman et al., 1990; Ashton, et al., 1994). Thus, it appears that modern northern colonies of *E. longissima* are best regarded as remnants from past warmer climates rather than as Roman introductions.

The present report deals with a new Pleistocene record of *Elaphe longissima* from near West Stow, Suffolk. This brings the total number of British Pleistocene records of this species to three, all from late middle Pleistocene sites in England (Fig. 1).

### The New Site: Beeches Pit, West Stow, Suffolk

The Beeches Pit lies in an abandoned brickyard near West Stow, Suffolk (National Grid Reference TL 798719). A preliminary report on the site (Preece et al., 1991) discussed its remarkable mollusc fauna, as well as its fishes and 12 species of mammals. Both the moluscs and the mammals suggest a late middle Pleistocene age and a temperate climate.

*Elaphe longissima* is represented at the Beeches Pit site by two trunk vertebrae (University College London, Institute of Field Archaeology - Sample 8, Trench 2, Unit 1) collected in 1991 by Simon Parfitt of the institute and identified in 1992 by J.A. Holman. Characters used to identify individual vertebrae of *Elaphe longissima* were given by Holman et al. (1990). Szyndlar (1984) also discusses the identification of this species on the basis of vertebral remains. Associated with the snake at the Beeches Pit site were remains of *Triturus* sp., *Rana* sp., and *Anguis fragilis*.

### Previous Records of *Elaphe longissima* in Britain

*Elaphe longissima* was reported from the Cudmore Grove site, Essex, (NGR TM 068146) on the basis of three trunk vertebrae (Holman et al., 1990). This site also represents the late middle Pleistocene, and is thought to have had a warmer climate than present one, based on the pollen spectrum and the faunal remains. The herpetofauna at the Cudmore Grove site consisted of at least 14 species, half of which are continental forms that do not occur in Britain today.

*Elaphe longissima* was recently reported from the lower Palaeolithic East Farm, Barnham site, near Thetford, Suffolk (NGR TL 875787), by Ashton et al. (1994).



Fig. 1: Pleistocene localities of *Elaphe longissima* in Britain. 1, East Farm, Barnham, Suffolk. 2, Beeches Pit, West Stow, Suffolk. 3, Cudmore Grove, Essex. All of these sites represent the late middle Pleistocene.

This site also represents the late middle Pleistocene. Vertebrae representing *Elaphe longissima* from the site were identified by J.A. Holman in 1993 and 1994. Twelve species of amphibians and reptiles were listed by Ashton et al. (1994) from the site and more species are yet to be recorded. Several continental herptiles that do not occur in Britain today have been identified at East Farm, Barnham. The fauna at this site indicates warmer conditions than occur there today.

#### REMARKS

Arnold and Burton (1978) state that *Elaphe longissima* is usually found in dry habitats such as sunny woods and shrubby vegetation, but that it also may be encountered on old walls, ruins, and haystacks. They report, that in the northern part of its range, this snake may be in special localities such as sheltered, south facing slopes on light soils. Thus, it would seem that the recovery of *Elaphe longissima* fossils from the three British sites would indicate not only a somewhat warmer summer climate than occurs in these areas today, but the likely presence of dry, sunny habitats.

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