

***NATRIX NATRIX* (Grass Snake): ALBINO HATCHLING.** Albino Grass Snakes are a rarity in Britain. Boulenger (1913) wrote that they are found 'occasionally', noting a specimen from Horsted Keynes, Sussex. Procter (1926) gave a detailed description of an albino Grass Snake that was donated to London Zoo, and Bowles (2001) described a young albino, found at Moor Park Golf Course in Hertfordshire (Fig. 1).

In October 2002 a member of the public captured an albino hatchling Grass Snake in a garden in the Dunwich Forest area of the Suffolk Sandlings (O.S. reference TM47) (Fig. 2). The snake was passed on to a member of staff from an English Nature local team, and has been reported in the newsletter of the Suffolk Naturalists' Society (Baker, 2003). This albino differed in some details of coloration from the previously described snakes (Boulenger, 1913; Procter, 1926; Bowles, 2001). The main difference lies in the background coloration, which is pale pink in the current specimen, but was

Figure 1. Albino Grass Snake from Moor Park Golf Course. Watercolour ©Frank Bowles.



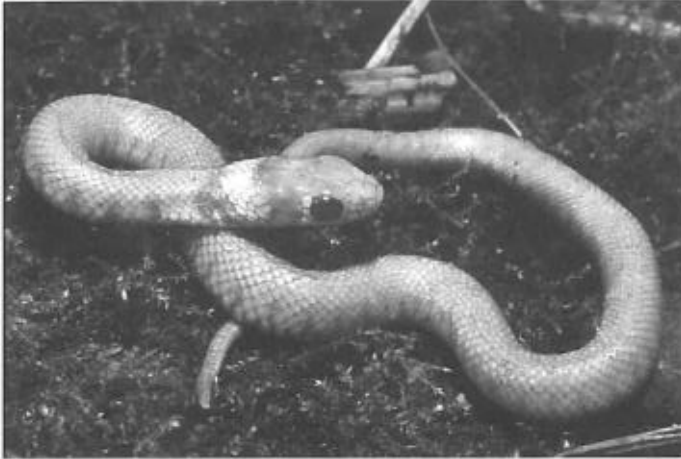


Figure 1. Hatchling albino Grass Snake from Dunwich Forest, Suffolk. Photograph by author.

described as yellowish flesh colour, ivory-white or pale cream in the previous accounts. This difference may be age-related; the earlier descriptions make no reference to hatchlings and the specimen reported by Bowles was about 60 cm long.

There are some similarities between the Dunwich snake and previous descriptions, but there are also several differences, as there are between the previously described albinos themselves. In the Dunwich snake the collar was cream – as in the snake described by Procter. However, Boulenger noted that the collar could also be yellow. In the hatchling the bars and other, normally, black markings were pale mauve-pink. Procter explained this as being due to the muscle tissue showing through the transparent skin. In Procter's specimen internal organs could be seen through the transparent (normally black) areas. These were not apparent in the currently reported hatchling. Boulenger described these normally dark markings as reddish, and in Bowles' specimen they were light grey. Similarly, the white tongue of the Dunwich snake corresponds with Procter's description, but Boulenger noted that the tongue was red. Boulenger and Bowles reported red eyes, but Procter described the eyes of the London Zoo specimen as being dark red with a pale orange iris; those of the Dunwich Forest specimen were pink, but also with an orange iris.

In most cases of albinism, the chances of survival in the wild are likely to be lower than for normally

coloured animals, as the individuals concerned will be more conspicuous to predators. This particular hatchling certainly drew the attention of the householder who captured it. It was also not a vigorous animal. Due to the low chance of survival in the wild and the curiosity value of the animal, it was kept in a vivarium by a local herpetologist, Mark Jones. However, its lack of vigour persisted. It was lethargic, lying motionless in the open – rather than under the shelter provided – and was unresponsive to moving objects. Three weeks after capture the snake died and was donated to the Ipswich Museum.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Dave Bird (BHS librarian), Frank Bowles and Leigh Gillett for their help in preparing this note.

REFERENCES

- Baker, J. (2003). Albino grass snake. *White Admiral* 54, 20.
- Boulenger, G. A. (1913). *Snakes of Europe*. London: Methuen.
- Bowles, F. D. (2001). Encounters with reptiles and amphibians in southern England during the war years, 1939-1945. *Herpetol. Bull.* 76, 8-9.
- Procter, J. (1926). A note on an albino grass snake. *Proc. Zool. Soc. Lond.* 1926, 1095-1096 (and plate).
- JOHN BAKER. 63A The Thoroughfare, Halesworth, Suffolk IP19 8AR.