

***NATRIX NATRIX* (Grass Snake): UNUSUAL MARKINGS.** On September 11th 2003 a juvenile Grass Snake was captured at a site on the Hampshire/Surrey border. This was part of a capture and release programme in an area earmarked for development where reptiles, (*Anguis fragilis*, *Zootoca vivipara* and *Natrix natrix*), were released in suitable adjacent habitat via an exclusion fence.

The snake was found beneath refugia, (roofing felt), and was observed to have recently moulted, the discarded skin being under the same refugia.

The snake was measured and weighed; total length 210 mm, (172 + 38 mm), weight 7.6 g. The snake was deemed to be a juvenile female in its second season born during the summer of 2002.

A vivid pale yellow collar and black inverted 'V' marking immediately behind the head was typical, although the black patch had a thin pale border. The actual body markings were less typical and very unusual. Grass snakes vary considerably with regard to markings and the typical Western European subspecies, *N. n. helvetica* is usually the most heavily marked, and for this reason is sometimes called the Barred Grass Snake. Typical markings are vertical lateral bars interspaced with smaller bars or spots on the dorsolateral surface which may extend across the vertebral line.



The dark markings on this snake were dominant to the extent that the apart from some white stippling, the last 50 mm of the body and tail was black. The vertical lateral bars were fused with higher lateral markings giving the snake a distinctive viperine appearance. Indeed, when viewed from above, and if the head was not visible, the snake could easily have been mistaken for a young Adder, *Vipera berus*. However, the zig-zag pattern was formed by the grey ground colour and not the actual markings and consisted of thirty five 'windings' running for almost the entire length of the dorsal surface. Interestingly, the ventral surface was entirely black and bore no trace of the more usual 'chequer board' markings.

The snake was photographed and released the next day.

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Left: *Natrix n. helvetica*. Typical heavily marked adult from Surrey.

Below: *Natrix natrix*. Unusually marked juvenile female from Hampshire/Surrey border. Photographs ©Tony Phelps.

