

ADDERS

When I was a child and my family bought our first car, it became our habit to drive out into the countryside on a Sunday afternoon. We lived in Salisbury and one of our most frequent destinations was the New Forest. One of my strongest memories of these visits is of always being warned by my mother to be careful of adders, and often being made to wear wellie boots especially when blackberrying. But much to my disappointment, we never once saw an adder!

In contrast, when Youth Hostelling in the Isle of Wight in May with a friend when I was about 17, we had several really good sightings of adders coiled up sunning themselves on the edge of the disused railways along which we did much of our walking. We were able to get really good views of their dramatic black zigzags on a grey or brown background.

An adder near Wooltack Watch Station, photographed by Richard Neale in 2010



Since then my sightings have been sporadic, the most recent sighting being of a sunbathing adder in the hedge-bank near Lockley Lodge. It turns out that the Deer Park is something of a hot-spot for adders – they are sighted there quite frequently. And indeed the gorse and bracken habitat at this site is the kind of thing that adders really like. In Pembrokeshire they can be found wherever there is coastal habitat of this kind – St David's Head is another regular spot.

However, little is known about the local population – is it stable, decreasing, increasing – no-one knows. And where are the “hibernacula” – the sites where snakes overwinter, often communally? In order to find out some answers to these questions there are surveys being organised, so if you see someone peering into the gorse and bracken they may well be trying to find adders!

All this is taking place against a “doom and gloom” background – a report has just been produced which claims that adders are perilously close to extinction in the UK except at a small number of “hotspots”. Adder populations seem to be decreasing, though no-one is quite sure why. One of the problems could be that adders are very loyal to their home territory and are reluctant to move away. Any disturbance, whether from walkers, dogs or habitat management may therefore be problematic.

In the meantime all adder sightings should be reported. It seems the best place to report sightings is the West Wales Biodiversity Information Centre website www.wwbic.org.uk. If you prefer to use your phone, you can also use the LERC Wales app which can be downloaded from www.lercwales.org.uk/app and is apparently very easy to use. (The data you enter is stored on iRecord). Or you can just send them to me and I will log them – please provide details of date, time and location.

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