

The smooth snake meets its champion

MP Desmond Swayne is introduced to the rare smooth snake and the projects that are being taken forward to conserve the species

New Forest West MP, Sir Desmond Swayne, came face to face with a smooth snake at the New Forest Reptile Centre near Lyndhurst when he met with members of a conservation project (on Wednesday 27th July 2016). Sir Desmond is the national Species Champion for the smooth snake, which is Britain's rarest native species of reptile.

The smooth snake is a rare and elusive species which occurs almost entirely on the heaths of Dorset, Hampshire and Surrey in the UK. Due to its secretive nature, part of the problem of conserving the species is therefore knowing where it is and how its numbers are faring. A project called 'The New Forest Smooth Snake Survey' has been set up specifically to address this issue by engaging with a network of volunteers to look for the animals in their habitat. The project is run by a partnership of organisations and led by Amphibian & Reptile Conservation Trust (ARC), a wildlife charity based in Bournemouth.

Tony Gent, CEO of ARC, said: "Actually finding smooth snakes is fairly low tech; it needs dedication and a good eye, but we also take advantage of their habit of hiding under objects. Sheets of roofing material carefully placed in their environment encourages the animals to bask underneath and so aids their detection. The analysis we're undertaking is definitely hi-tech and uses environmental data and computer modelling techniques to predict where the species is likely to be found within the New Forest".

Ian Barker, ecologist at the New Forest National Park Authority who have helped fund the project with a £20,000 grant, said: "We're delighted to be working in partnership with ARC, the Forestry Commission, Natural England, and a range of other organisations and our dedicated group of over 70 volunteers to help us study the wildlife in the New Forest. The data we obtain will allow the Forest to be managed with the species in mind."

Ben Limburn, New Forest Smooth Snake Survey Project Officer, said: "The New Forest has a fantastic mix of habitats in which all our six native species of reptile can be found: the smooth snake, adder, grass snake, slow-worm, common lizard and in some areas of the National Park, the rare sand lizard. This is a great opportunity to highlight the significance of the smooth snake as a rare and interesting species which lives in the National Park and how we are working towards conservation of our native reptiles through the New Forest Smooth Snake Survey project."

ARC is currently working towards developing the project across the heathlands of southern England which represent the entire range of the smooth snake in Britain.

The Species Champion initiative, launched by a coalition of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), has seen nearly 30 iconic and threatened English species being 'adopted' by MPs across England, acting as 'Species Champions' to help improve the species' future.

Sir Desmond said "With the New Forest being one of the key areas for the smooth snake, it is great to see a project that uses good old fashioned natural history coming together with state of the art science. This will help the conservation of this rare species that I am proud to champion, but also in a way that will help us conserve many other species too."

Photos attached:

01. Sir Desmond Swayne with New Forest Partners. From left to right: Simon Holloway (Forestry Commission, Works Supervisor – South Walks), Ben Limburn (Amphibian and Reptile Conservation – New Forest Smooth Snake Survey Project Officer), Ian Barker (New Forest National Park Authority, Ecologist), Sir Desmond Swayne (MP for New Forest West and smooth snake Species Champion), Paul Edgar (Natural England, Senior Environmental Specialist - Amphibians & Reptiles), Tony Gent (Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, Chief Executive Officer), Richard Daponte (New Forest Ranger). Credit ARC.
02. Sir Desmond Swayne holding Smooth Snake. Credit: Ian Barker (NFNPA).
03. Smooth snake (cut to white GIF file). Credit: Chris Gleed-Owen.
04. Smooth snake. Credit Stuart Woodley.

For more information:

Visit: www.arc-trust.org/nf-sss.html
www.facebook.com/NewForestSmoothSnakeSurvey

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Notes for editors:

- **Species Champions project:** The Species Champions initiative was launched in March 2016 by a coalition of seven nature NGOs - RSPB, Butterfly Conservation, Bumblebee Conservation Trust, Buglife, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation, Plantlife and Bat Conservation Trust. This follows a successful model in Scotland, and a trial in the South West of England in 2014. Iconic and threatened English species are being 'adopted' by MPs across England, who are acting as 'Species Champions' to help improve the species' future. From the snake's head fritillary to the nightingale, around 30 English species of plants and animals currently facing significant threats have so far been identified and put up for adoption. See: <https://www.buglife.org.uk/specieschampions>
- The **smooth snake** (*Coronella austriaca*) is Britain's rarest reptile and one of only three types of snake native to in the UK. In Britain, its range is restricted to the heathlands of southern England. It is non-venomous and catches its prey, which consists of small mammals and other reptiles, in its jaws and then wraps them in coils of its body before swallowing it whole. It is a small species of snake rarely exceeding 70 cm in length and generally brown or grey in colour with darker blotch pattern along its back. It has a small, but noticeably golden coloured eye. It gets its common name from having smooth scales; many other snake species have ridges on their scales which makes them rough to the touch. Its camouflaged colour and secretive behaviour, together with its rarity, mean that smooth snakes are difficult to see.
- Smooth snakes are fully protected by law in the UK. The smooth snake held by Sir Desmond was collected and handled at this event under the terms of a licence issued to ARC by Natural England.
- **The New Forest Smooth Snake Survey project:** To find out more about the species, the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust (ARC), on behalf of a number of organisations, has been awarded grant funding by the New Forest National Park Authority's Sustainable Communities Fund (£20,000), Natural England (£5000) and Forestry Commission (£3000) which totals £28,000. The project involves a network of 70 volunteers looking for the snakes in areas within the National Park where the species has not been previously recorded or is under-recorded. The data collected will be used to conserve the species by informing and supporting management of its healthand habitats.
- **The Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust** is a national wildlife charity dedicated the conservation of native frogs, toads, newts, snakes and lizards. Its headquarters is in Bournemouth. See: www.arc-trust.org

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