

An adder a day.

I once picked an adder up, it was only about 15cm long, but its jaws still immediately flew open in self-defence, it couldn't get me, I guess I was fortunate. It was probably newly born of its viviparous mother [more correctly ovoviviparous – but it's a clumsy word] and its siblings could not be far off but I didn't find them. Obviously common sense tells you not to pick up an adder but this one was so beautiful and small that I could not resist a closer look. Do not do what I did as even the small ones may carry venom although I doubt if the wee fangs would penetrate far and sometimes it's a "dry" bite anyway – but don't risk it! A snake bite in the remote hills could prove very awkward and uncomfortable especially so for the very young or elderly. Some might say that we are fortunate that there do not appear to be high densities of adders in the north, in all my travels on the hill [and by rivers] over the years I have only come across adders a handful of times, mostly around Kylestrome for some reason. There is a stretch of track there I have nicknamed reptile road as I have come across adders, slow worms and lizards on numerous visits to the site. I have heard reports of them from other places, for instance on the Cape Wrath area [minibus running over one, peat stack infested with them], Loch Hope side by Arnaboll [many serpents there!], the Strath Chailleach bothy near Sandwood [mentions in the log book] and near Scourie but have never encountered any in these places.



It is always a surprise to come across one and I admit to reacting with an initial alarmed start before relaxing and enjoying the meeting, the snake probably does not share mutual admiration. The first I ever came across was during my young years on an Autumn holiday in the Scottish borders whilst we were walking through a plantation fire break and about to jump up on a large boulder. Mid jump I spied the adder basking on the rock, the jump magically increased, and I flew over adder and stone, landing at a run and kept on running with my brother hard at my heels, half a mile later we presumed ourselves safe. Perthshire was also a good region to find them; I came upon them more there than anywhere else while out walking, around Pitlochry and Blair Atholl. The general distribution appears widespread across the country excepting Shetland, Orkney and Lewis & Harris unless it's just that no one has recorded them, plus of course St Patrick banished them from Ireland. Most people will chance upon them lying soaking up the sunshine, especially on a warm spring morning if recently arisen from hibernation [the snake not the person]. There are reports of hibernacula being disturbed and numerous snakes found therein, one gruesome tale mentioned a hunter killing 20 with one shot; that was "the old days" adders are now protected by law but are becoming rare in many localities.

My own most recent encounter was during a guided walk out to Glen Dubh near Kylesku, we were walking and blethering along the track not paying too much attention to our surroundings when my companion suddenly grabbed my arm and stopped us, half a metre away in the middle of the path was an adder, a dark one, not big, maybe 35cm long, lying peacefully enjoying the warm sun. We backed off; I did not want to disturb it. It raised its head sensing in our direction, you could almost hear its thoughts – "oh bother, boring people I'm going to have to move before they stand on me", then he [probably male as most females are brownish] slowly slithered off as snakes do, into a cool damp ditch thick with heather. I do not know of many records for the sizes of Highland adders but I'm presuming that this one was below average length, possibly a youngster, 65cm long seems an average but up to 90cm in England with a weight from 50 – 180g with the female heavier and longer. The length of lifespan looks debateable, anything from 8 to 20 years is given and the number of young from 5 up to 20 from various sources. It is worth sending in records of any sightings, reptile or otherwise as the Highland Biological Recording Group is always keen to receive them, check the web site at www.hbrg.org.uk.

Donald Mitchell - Countryside Ranger, Northwest Sutherland