



By
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Snakes are limbless reptiles, and they are cold-blooded (or exothermic), which means they cannot make their own body heat as we mammals do. Instead they have to use external energy sources such as the sun. Snakes are also air-breathing (unlike amphibians that can breathe underwater) and they are covered in scales that they can moult (or shed) in one large piece at different stages in their life, having grown new scales underneath.

Around 2,900 species have been identified so far, on every continent except Antarctica. Though there are no snakes in Ireland, three species can be found in Britain (the Adder, Grass Snake and Smooth Snake). Of these the Adder is the only venomous species (meaning it has a bite that can be harmful), however it does not bite people unless it feels threatened and its venom is very mild.

The eyesight of most snakes is not great, however because most of

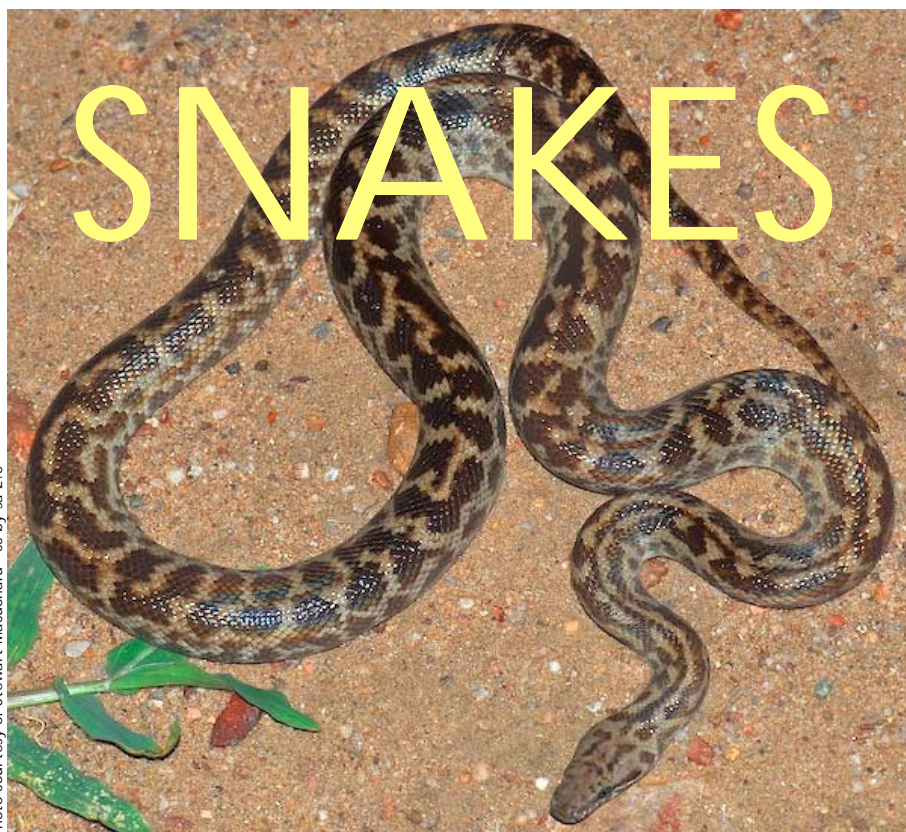


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their body is in contact with the ground they are very sensitive to vibrations and movement. They also use their forked tongues to track their prey by smell, and if you ever see a snake you might notice that its tongue is constantly moving when it is stuck out. Snakes cannot chew their prey so they use either venom or constriction (squeezing until the prey cannot breathe) to kill their food and then swallow them whole. All snakes are carnivorous (meat-eaters).

Above: The Spotted python (*Antaresia maculosa*).

Why are there no snakes in Ireland?

Serpents are often symbols of the devil or pagan religions. Legend has it that when St. Patrick converted people in Ireland to Christianity, he banished snakes from the country and in so doing drove out pagan religions. On the other hand some scientists believe that snakes just did not make it to Ireland in time, before it split off from Britain as a separate island after the last Ice Age.



Snakey Baby

Most snakes lay eggs, although some do give birth to live young. A snake's egg is leathery rather than hard like a chicken's. Baby snakes have an egg tooth which they use to break through the leathery egg casing but they will lose this egg tooth shortly after hatching. Most eggs are abandoned once they have been laid and the young snakes will have to fend for themselves once they hatch.

