

NCRW Bulletin

In Response to Media Coverage of Escaped Snakes

In recent weeks, there has been a surge of media attention around the issue of exotic snakes being found in the wild, with many reports attempting to tie this to a rising number of people keeping snakes.

In 2022, the Federation of British Herpetologists (FBH), in collaboration with the Pet Food Manufacturer's Association (PFMA) conducted a survey aimed specifically at creating an accurate picture of the scale of reptile ownership in the UK, which found that rather than the lower numbers of previous estimates, there are around 3 million snakes kept as pets in the UK. Of these, the most commonly kept are the royal python and corn snake, with larger species such as the common boa and reticulated python taking 3rd and 5th place, respectively.¹

The RSPCA has reported that in 2021, they took 1,219 reports of snakes in the wild, with the highest numbers coming – unsurprisingly – during the summer.²

While the RSPCA's helpline is an indispensable resource, as more specialist organisation, the data that we have collected shows a slightly different picture, and our data may very well be able act as a complementary and clarifying lens on what the RSPCA has found in their data.

The NCRW and Snakes in the Wild

The National Centre for Reptile Welfare is in operation 365 days a year and runs a 24-hour help line that runs on a very straight-forward process:

When someone phones or messages that they have found a snake in the wild which they believe to be exotic, the first thing we do is ask if they can send us a photograph of the snake. This allows us to very quickly identify the snake and assess if it is native or exotic.

If it is an exotic species, we are typically able to dispatch help and have them on location within 2 hours, with an average turnaround of 20-30 minutes.

If the species is a native species, we typically give them advice for dealing with the animal – typically this involves releasing the animal and providing information. In some cases, the animal may be in distress or injured, in which case help is dispatched to assist or bring the animal in in the latter cases. An example of this occurred some weeks ago when a grass snake was found trapped in some pond netting **[Do we have a picture of this? It could be a good image to use]** – help was sent out to assist the caller in freeing the snake, who was uninjured and went on its way.

At present, we only collect data on animals which have come in to the Centre, which means that unless it is injured and must come in to us, we typically do not capture the span of data on native species calls – this is something we are looking to remedy in the coming year, as it has become clear that this is data that needs capturing. However, in this summer, roughly only 1 in 4 calls about snakes in the wild are exotics, in June of this year, we had 6 grass snake calls in a single day!

The ability to receive photographs of the snakes and provide immediate identification is something that allows us to provide a clearer picture of how many exotic snakes are actually being found in the wild.

Exotic Snakes Found in the Wild – How Many Actually?

Of the 554 exotic snakes taken in by the NCRW in 2022, only 25 (4.5%) of them were found in the wild, and so far, 2023 has been similar, with 536 exotic snakes taken in, and 30 (5.6%) of them found in the wild. As with the RSPCA, the number of snakes peaks in the summer, then tapers off in September [Figure 1], which correlates with the times of year one would usually expect higher levels of activity from snakes of all kinds.

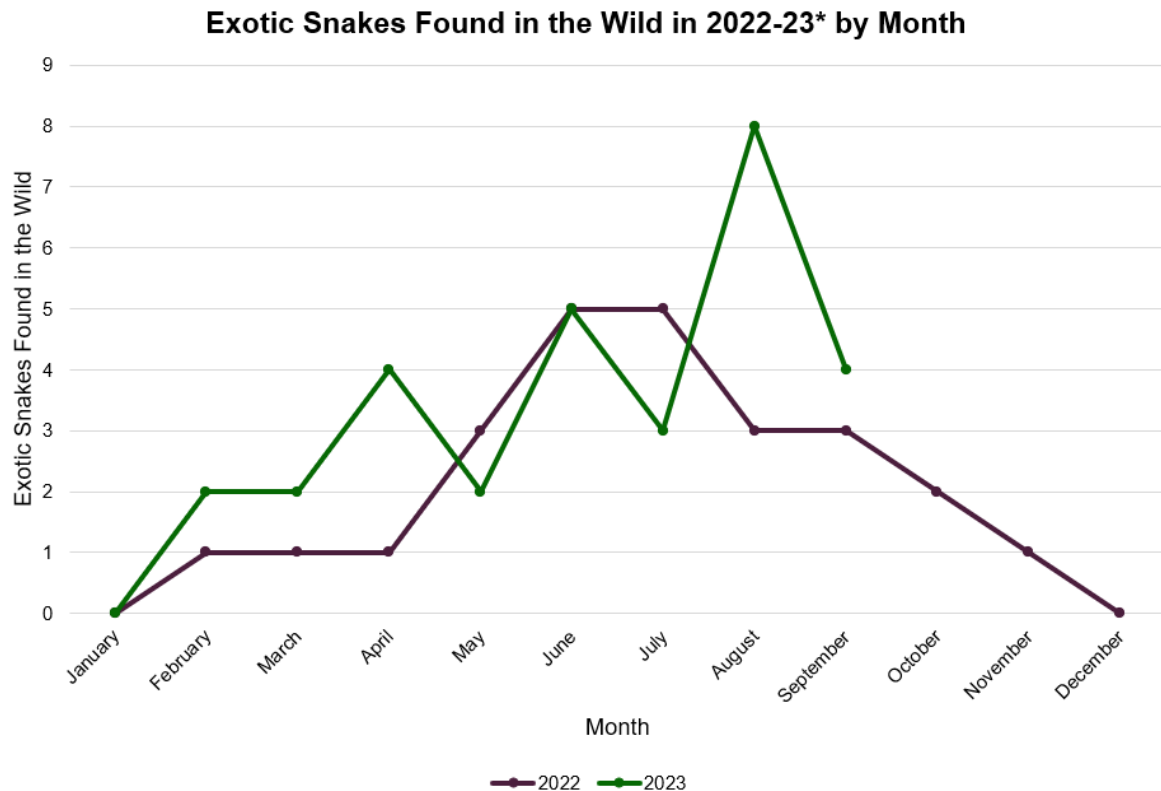


Figure 1. Totals of exotic snakes found in the wild in both 2022 and 2023 (through 08 Sept. 2023) by month.

In both 2022 and 2023, the most commonly found snakes have been corn snakes, making up over 50% of exotic snakes found in the wild, and while there has been an increase of large constrictors found in the wild in 2023 compared to 2022, this has actually only come in the form of two more snakes than were found last year, for a total of 4 [Figure 2]. The vast majority of exotic snakes found in the wild in the UK are corn snakes or similar species such as rat snakes or kingsnakes.

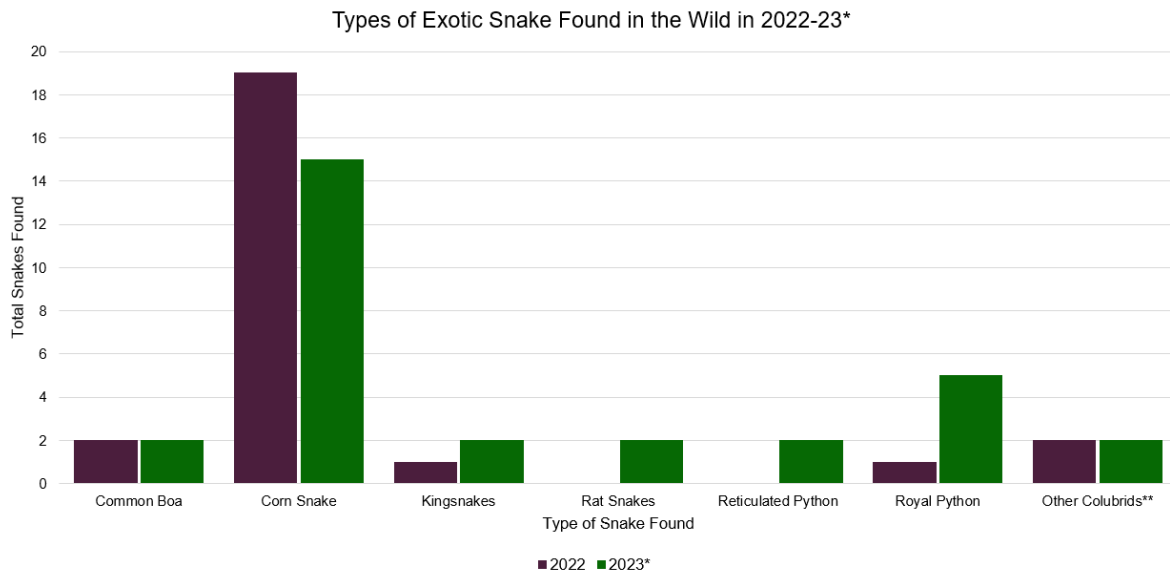


Figure 2. Types of exotic snakes found in the wild from 2022 to 2023 (current as of 08 Sept. 2023).

**Other Colubrids indicates members of the family Colubridae other than rat snakes, corn snakes, and kingsnakes, including the Western Hognose.

How Do They Get There?

When the NCRW receives a report of an animal found in the wild, we do not speculate on how it got there without further evidence – it was found in the wild, and that is the fact of the matter as we have it.

However, it is noteworthy that in 2022, we were able to reunite 20% of snakes found in the wild with their owners, and in 2023, we have thus far managed to facilitate similar reunions in 17% of cases. In fact, 75% of animals found in the wild that we eventually reunited with their owners are snakes, far outstripping other taxa, including tortoises. It stands to reason then, that many of these snakes are, in fact, escapees whose owners miss them.

Preventing Escape

One of the most important ways to mitigate the appearance of escaped exotic snakes in the wild is by preventing escape to begin with, and education can go a long way towards this. Below we outline some of the easiest ways to prevent your snake from escaping.

1. Make Sure Your Vents are Installed Correctly

On many flat-packed vivariums, such as those by Vivexotic, vents are designed with ease of access in mind, and allow owners to install themselves to more easily organise cables and power cords. However, we have found that about a third of vivariums which are brought in to us as donations have their vents installed the wrong way [Figure 3], creating a situation in which a determined snake can push the vent out and slip through the resulting hole. Larger snakes may have more trouble with this, but a clever and resourceful corn snake would have very little trouble.

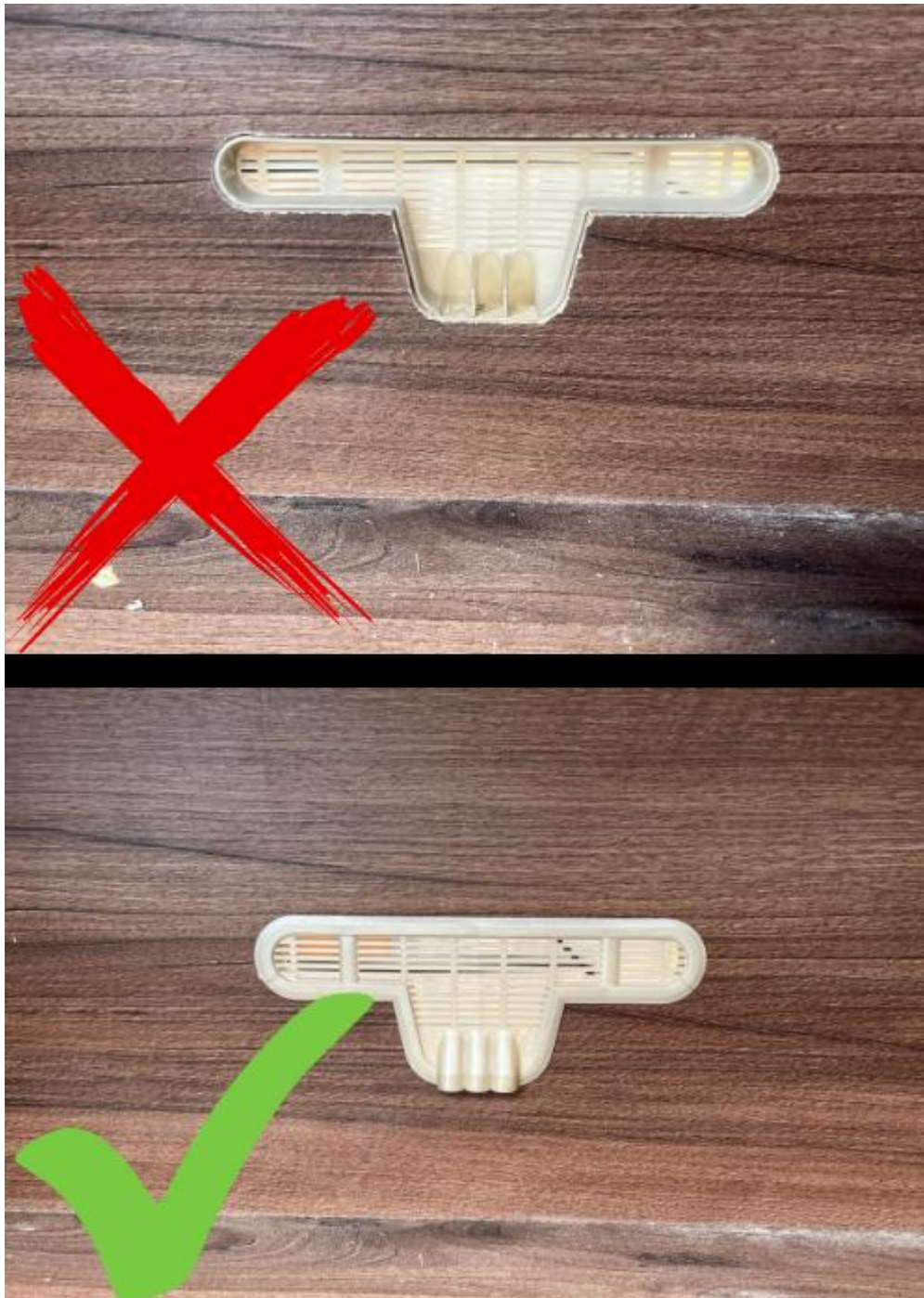


Figure 3. If your vents look like the top image - stop! They can be easily pushed out by a determined snake. Take a moment to flip them around.

Fortunately, the solution to this is as simple as making sure the vent is in securely and facing the correct way around – if you're not sure, try pushing it out from the inside – if you can, so could your snake! We would also recommend that manufacturers make sure that instructions for installing vents are clear about which way should be facing inwards.

2. Keep the Runners Free of Substrate

Another major way that a snake can escape, which may also apply to other reptiles, is when a bit of substrate – usually bark – gets in the runner that the glass is set in, preventing the door from closing all the way. The resulting gap may be small, but if there's enough room to

wedge a bit of their nose in and create leverage, a smart snake, or even lizard, can carefully work the door open enough to slip out. The solution to this is to just keep an eye on things – if some bark gets in your runners, use a little brush, your finger, or something else to remove it and make sure the glass closes entirely. Then make sure the door is secured with one of the options listed in the next section.

3. Securing the Glass

There are several ways to secure your vivarium's glass doors. One of the easiest is to – if you have a Vivexotic brand vivarium – use the plastic lock plug that comes with the vivarium, as this will prevent the glass doors from sliding at all while it is installed. However, it is important to make sure it's installed the correct way [Figure 4], as otherwise the snake can push it out and if small enough, slip right through the opening.



Figure 4. Vivexotic brand vivariums come with this handy plastic door lock, but make sure you have it in the correct way - you should see the logo looking back at you!

Another option is to install a lock [Figure 5], which uses a key to lock to the glass panes in place when closed. These can be a bit fiddley and take time to open and shut, but are very secure.



Figure 5. Locks like these can feel clunky and complicated, but are very secure when used correctly.

Finally, one of the most popular options for vivariums that aren't Vivexotics is the trusty window-wedge doorstop [Figure 6]. For these, you simply slip the wedge into the seam between the two panes of glass, using friction to prevent them from sliding open.



Figure 6. A well-placed window ledge can also act as an effective 'door-stop', especially for smaller species.

All of these options require that the keeper do their due diligence to make sure they are in place, and we can't overstate the need to pay close attention to security, just as you would want to make sure your front door was shut securely to stop your other pets getting out!

Concluding Thoughts

While finding exotic snakes in the wild is a cause for concern, and certainly more can be done to raise awareness of ways to prevent escape, there are not substantial numbers of large snakes being found in the wild, nor are there large numbers of smaller exotic snakes, with most reports being native species. However, more data is needed to get a clear picture of the exact ratio of native reports to exotics, and we are hoping to capture that data in the future.

1. Federation of British Herpetologists (FBH). (2023). *The FBH Reptile and Amphibian Keepers' Survey 2022*. [pdf] Available at: thefbh.org/publications
2. Glover, P. (2023). "Snake escapes surge as numbers kept as pets increase by 200k," *East London Advertiser*, 07/09/2023. Available at: eastlondonadvertiser.co.uk/news/national/uk-today/23773658.snake-escapes-surge-numbers-kept-pets-increase-200k/