

It’s World Snake Day and the smooth snake, the UK’s rarest reptile, has been awarded a National Lottery lifeline.

The smooth snake is having a rough time. Its habitats are under threat and its secretive behaviour means not enough is known to help the species survive.

That’s all set to change as the Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Trust (ARC) launches its Snakes in the Heather project, backed by £412,000 from the National Lottery.

> “You’ve heard of snakes on a plane, but not enough people have heard about snakes on the plains!"

It will see hundreds of volunteers and citizen scientists helping to conserve habitats, create the first records of the species and discover what needs to be done to secure its future.

Smooth snake

First identified in 1852, the smooth snake is one of just three native species, the others being the much better-known adder and grass snake. They live in southern England’s lowland heaths, predominately in Dorset, Hampshire and Surrey. There are also isolated populations in West Sussex and Devon.

Over 160 years later so little is known about the smooth snake that there are no records of its numbers.

There is no doubt however that the species is at risk.

The RSPB’s 2016 State of Nature report warned that half of our native species have declined and since 1800, 85% of the smooth snakes’ lowland heath habitats have declined and remain under threat.

Bright future

ARC is taking action to save the smooth snake.

Supported by organisations including the RSPB, National Trust, Wildlife Trusts, Plantlife and the Forestry Commission the project will:

- conserve habitats across southern England
- train hundreds of volunteers to record, monitor and survey populations
- raise awareness of the snake and inspire people to look after habitats
- create a Smooth Snake Conservation Handbook to help citizen scientists get involved and to promote understanding of the species’ needs
- share findings with organisations across the UK to inform future conservation work

The project will have wider benefits for nature too. The smooth snake is an important part of the ecosystem, feeding mainly on lizards and occasionally small mammals. Helping the smooth snake will enable many other species, common and rare, to thrive.

Stuart Hobley, The National Lottery Heritage Fund Director of England, London & South, said: “You’ve heard of snakes on a plane, but not enough people have heard about snakes on the plains!

"Heather habitats are vital to a menagerie of reptiles, lizards and mammals and thanks to National Lottery players, ARC is setting out to get hundreds of people involved in securing the future of the smooth snake.”

Dr Tony Gent, ARC's Chief Executive Officer, said: “We would like to say a big ‘thank you’ to National Lottery players for helping us to launch this exciting project.”