



Magical creatures

AN APPRECIATION OF THE ADDER

Words: MARK O'SHEA

“It is the bright day that brings forth the adder, and that craves wary walking,” says Brutus in William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. There can be few creatures as reviled as the snake, yet they’ve managed to find their way into the beliefs, myths, and cultures of almost every human group with which they share common ground.

I’m an affirmed ‘ophidiophile’. My engagement with wild snakes began with a resplendent male adder when I was eight and off school, sick. On the final day before I went back, my aunt took me for a day out, to get some countryside air into my lungs, to Kinver Edge, a beautiful escarpment, now owned by the National Trust, straddling the Staffordshire/Worcestershire border.

I was very familiar with the lie of the land, having been there many times for bracing Sunday walks with my parents, younger brother, and our pet dog and I always lived in hope of seeing a real live snake there.

We parked below the towering sandstone edifice of Holy Austin Rock and set off into the woodland, parallel with the line of escarpment. It was a bright day, but not overly hot, and we had probably only been walking for around ten or 15 minutes when my aunt, who was wearing sandals, and had presumably been pondering the wisdom of her choice of footwear, asked “There aren’t any snakes here, are there?” To which I replied “Oh, there are but we’ve never seen one.” And then, right on cue, I heard it: a sound I had never heard

before, but instantly recognised for what it was. This was not the pitter-patter of a small mammal, a bird, or a lizard, but the continuous crackling of something limbless gliding over dead bracken, and it was coming in our direction. In a hushed and excited voice, I urged my aunt to stand still and with my breath held in case it gave away my presence, looked toward the sound, just as a beautiful male adder poured himself into view, newly sloughed, black zig-zag contrasting with his pale grey ground colour, lip scales edged with black, and red eyes gleaming. I was mesmerised.

Although today I am content to stand and watch these gorgeous creatures and introduce my students to them, to my eight-year-old self this was a wild snake, and in my immature mind, fair game. I broke the spell, and foolishly: “Catch it,” I cried! Both my aunt and I dropped to our knees in an amateurish attempt to corral the UK’s only venomous serpent, without consideration of the obvious questions; ‘why?’, ‘how?’ and ‘what with?’ Needless to say the adder was more than a match for us and disappeared into the undergrowth, but the die was cast, I would definitely now become a herpetologist. To quote the actor Nicolas Cage, “Every great story seems to begin with a snake”. 🐍
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