

Die Schlingnatter (*Coronella austriaca*) in Sachsen-Anhalt, Sachsen und Thüringen

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The smooth snake (*Coronella austriaca*) in the federal states of Saxony-Anhalt, Saxony and Thuringia

Information about the historical distribution of the smooth snake in Germany is fragmentary. These data are primarily based on individual observations, e. g. in Dürigen (1897). Results of a comprehensive nationwide mapping were reported 99 years later by Günther (1996). Here we review records about the distribution of *Coronella austriaca* from 1996 until present in three federal states of Germany. In Saxony-Anhalt, the main distribution area of the species is in the Harz foreland, in the Dübener Heide (heathland), as well as in southern parts of the state (in cuestas and shell-limestone areas around Freyburg-Naumburg, in forests in the Elster valley of the Burgenland district). A high number of recent records is known from the Colbitz-Letzlinger Heide (restricted military area). Along the Fläming the species presently occurs at several isolated sites. The southernmost populations in Saxony-Anhalt are located in the Zeitzer forest and the valleys of the river Weiße Elster. They are separated from populations in the Saale basin and in Thuringia. In Thuringia the species occurs in central parts of the southern uplands and eastern parts of the sandstone layers along the Saale. In western Thuringia the snake is present in the Werra-region and the limestone area of Meiningen. There are no recent records of specimens from the Kyffhäuser area in Thuringia but the species can be found in areas further south near the Gera-Unstrut lowland. The undulating, cultivated landscape of Thuringia provides only few suitable habitats and represents a geographic barrier between the populations north and south of the state. Further geographic barriers are higher-altitude areas of the Thuringian Forest and the Thuringian Highland. The species covers large parts of northern Saxony and is partially distributed in the North-West, throughout the Dübener Heide, Dahleener Heide and the northern hilly landscape of Saxony. Further records have been reported from the Saxonian loess area, Elbe valley, Lower Lusatia, in particular from the Upper Lusatian Heath and Pond Landscape and from southernmost Upper Lusatia. In the Mulde uplands and the central Ore Mountains recent populations are widely dispersed. The species is most prevalent in the Elbe Sandstone Mountains and the Saxonian Vogtland region. Follow-ups of historical records can be found for all three states ranging from the 1880s to the present. Due to the fundamental changes in the methodology of field herpetological surveys in the years 1960–2018 (e.g. artificial refuges), it is difficult to compare the development of the smooth snake populations in Saxony-Anhalt, Saxony and Thuringia. A reliable assessment of the current status is only possible with local occurrences. Due to loss of habitats, a significant decline of the species is to be expected in all three federal states.

Key words: Smooth snake, *Coronella austriaca*, distribution, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Thuringia, species status, conservation.