

Scientific Name:

Coluber viridiflavus

English:

Western Whip Snake

Maltese:

is-serp l-iswed



Growing to 1.5 m in length, the Western Whip Snake is the largest and commonest snake in the Maltese Islands. It has a rounded snout, large eyes with a round pupil, and a long tapering tail. As its Maltese name suggests, adults are black and at times may also have a green glare. The shade of its underside is ash and occasionally yellow. In contrast, the young snakes have an olive-green head and a light ash colour which darkens along the years; these show the same colour as those of the adults on their fourth year.

The Western Whip Snake occupies all types of habitats; still it has a preference for dry and quiet places. One may come across it along valley sides, maquis and open rocky ground, where it is occasionally observed basking on rocks or rubble walls. It is an extraordinary hunter, using its vision to locate prey, which varies with local availability. However, it typically takes other reptiles and small mammals, including lizards and their eggs, mice, shrews, other smaller snakes, frogs and large insects. Though normally discreet, the Western Whip Snake is a powerful snake, and when angered, it hisses and thrashes the ground with its tail. Albeit lacking venom, it is swift and would bite to defend itself from its aggressor.

The start of the mating season kicks off in May, when violent fights are observed between males. During copulation, both partners roll and twist themselves around each other, holding their heads upright in a spectacular dance. In June or July, the female then deposits between 5-15 eggs in small holes or crevices that are reached by the sun's rays.

The population status of the Western Whip Snake is considered as favourable. Like all native snakes, the Western Whip Snake has been protected in Malta since 1992, and since such snake is considered to be of importance across Europe, it is also protected through regional legislation.

