

SUMMARY

The smooth snake *Coronella austriaca* (Laurenti, 1768) in the Ojców National Park (S Poland)

The smooth snake *Coronella austriaca* is considered as a very rare species in Poland, with decreasing population numbers. In the Ojców National Park (OPN) the snake has been reported only a few times, with two reliable records during the years 1977–2005. The smooth snake prefers sunny and dry slopes facing to the south, where it finds lizards and other snakes which the species hunts. Unfortunately, in the last quarter of the 20th century some of the possible localities for smooth snake had disappeared in the OPN due to the secondary succession of vegetation to scrub and woodland communities on abandoned meadows and pastures. Although the OPN carried out active protection in the most of such xerothermic stands on hill slopes and limestone rocks, there was no current information about the presence of the smooth snake. Some of the researchers believed that its local population is either seriously threatened with extinction or already extinct.

During the survey of several xerothermic stands in 2006 smooth snake was recorded at three sites from June till August. The UTM coordinates of all the stands are: DA16 (no detailed localities are given in the paper for protection reasons). Altogether 9 specimens of the species were recorded in patches of xerothermic vegetation on the deforested slopes along the river Prądnik valley. Eight of them were adults with body length 40–60 cm, and one juvenile specimen was only about 18 cm long. In one case there were 3 adult specimens found at the same time being only a few metres distant one from another. The most of the records were made during cold and cloudy days, often after rain. Five specimens were observed during the first decade of June, with the mean air temperature as low as 10,7°C (compared with the mean value 15,2°C for the years 1996–2005). The snakes were moving slowly in those conditions, trying to get warm in exposed places, so they could be easily observed. What was interesting, they were not observed at the same localities during hot and sunny days.

The number of the specimens observed in 2006 was surprisingly high. That suggests, that the smooth snake may be more frequent in the OPN than it was estimated on the base of previous observations. It is also possible that it inhabits some other localities. The active protection methods employed by the OPN to protect and restore open xerothermic habitats may also have positive effect on the smooth snake population.