

Snakes of Wisconsin by Wisconsin DNR

For centuries, snakes have been misunderstood, under-appreciated, and even heavily persecuted. However, most of us are enthralled with them and our natural curiosity seeks to better understand them. Snakes occur throughout most of the world and vary in length from 5 inches to more than 30 feet. They are closely related to lizards but do not have eyelids or ear openings. Snakes are ectothermic, relying on their surroundings to control their body temperatures. Wisconsin has 21 types of snakes including 19 non-venomous species and 2 venomous species, four of which are endangered and one of which is threatened with extinction.

Non-venomous Snakes*

*There is one species (the western worm snake) that is not listed here. It was officially accepted as a state species after the Snakes of Wisconsin book came out.

Prairie Ringneck Snake (*Diadophis punctatus arnyi*)



Family: Colubridae

Size: 12-14 in.

Status: Special Concern



Distribution Map

Description: A bright yellow-orange neck ring should help to identify this snake. It is distinguished from the northern ringneck by a yellow-orange belly and bright orange-red on the underside of its tail, with black half-moon spots scattered across the belly scales. Both subspecies, the prairie ringneck and northern ringneck, are colored slate blue/black on the back. Prairie ringnecks are highly secretive, spending most of the day under flat rocks along south-exposed road cuts and bluff prairies. In the spring and fall, they stay on the sides of open bluffs but move to moister places in summer. Their diet includes insects, salamanders, frogs, and other small snakes.

Northern Ringneck Snake (*Diadophis punctatus edwarsi*)



Family: Colubridae

Size: 10-15 in.

Status: Special
Concern



Distribution Map

Description: This snake is similar to the prairie ringneck in size and upper appearance but has a solid light yellow belly with no markings. Unlike most snakes, the northern ringneck makes its home in moist deciduous forests. Its diet consists of earthworms, beetles, salamanders, frogs, and other small snakes. The northern and prairie ringneck snakes may hybridize where their ranges overlap (see map below). Where this occurs, individual specimens often have belly patterns that represent a mix of characters from each subspecies.

Eastern Hognose Snake (*Heterodon platirhinos*)



Family: Colubridae

Size: 20-35 in.

Status: Common



Distribution Map

Description: This medium-sized snake, also referred to as a "puff adder", has a sharply upturned snout, which earned this snake its name. The back has dark brown blotches on a brown-gold background color, and their underside varies from mottled yellow to mottled gray or pink. Large, older adults are usually dark brown or gray and may be patternless. Most hognose snakes have a pair of dark black blotches on their neck that resemble "eyespot" when they flatten their neck. Habitats include bracken grassland, oak savanna and sand prairies, but they may be seen in southern forest. Their diet consists mainly of toads but other amphibians are also eaten.

Smooth Green Snake (*Opheodrys vernalis*)



Family: Colubridae

Size: 14-20 in.

Status: Common



Distribution Map

Description: This species is often called the grass snake due to its color. The name “smooth” refers to the unkeeled scales which give the snake a sleek, smooth texture and appearance. This beautiful little snake is one of only five Wisconsin snakes to have unkeeled scales. The bright emerald green color of this snake makes it easy to identify, although buff-colored individuals may be found in northern and central Wisconsin. No matter the adult color, the young are olive-green upon hatching. Smooth green snakes frequent prairies, oak savannas, bracken grasslands, open areas in pine barrens, and grassy areas along forest edges. Green snakes feed on insects, grubs, and worms.

Yellow-bellied or Blue Racer (*Coluber constrictor*)



Family: Colubridae

Size: 36-72 in.

Status: Protected Wild Animal



Distribution Map

Description: This sleek and slender snake is among North America's fastest snakes, traveling up to 4 mph. Adult coloration, present at about three years of age, is uniform and can vary from light to dark bluish, grayish or greenish. Hatchlings are heavily mottled with numerous dark blotches on the top and speckled with reddish-brown spots on the bottom. Yellow-bellied racers prefer open dry prairies, oak savannas, and old fields where sand is the dominant soil. Their diet consists of rodents, insects, amphibians and other reptiles.

Black Rat Snake or Pilot Snake (*Elaphe bsoleta*)



Family: Colubridae

Size: 40-72 in.

Status: Protected Wild Animal



Distribution Map

Description: This long and muscular snake is Wisconsin's only arboreal (tree-dwelling) snake. Their background color is dark brown to blackish and may be flecked with white, yellow or orange between the scales. Red and yellow flecks mark the dark gray or brown underside. The heads of adults are solid black or brown on top with white chins and throats. Juvenile black rat snakes are heavily patterned and look much like young fox snakes, although they tend to have more reddish blotches and are more slender than young fox snakes. Black rat snakes live in bluff prairies, oak woodlands and pastures, and are occasionally seen climbing or resting in the rafters of barns and other out buildings. Rodents and birds make up their diet.

Western Fox Snake ("Pine") (*Elaphe vulpina*)



Family: Colubridae

Size: 36-56 in.

Status: Common



Distribution Map

Description: The fox snake has many large reddish-brown, chocolate brown, or black mid-dorsal blotches along its back and other smaller blotches on its sides on a background color of yellow, tan or olive gray. The head of adults is usually a dark copper, rust or orange color. They live in a variety of open habitats including marshes, sedge meadows, prairies and old fields. Their diet consists primarily of rodents and ground-nesting birds. Young fox snakes will occasionally eat amphibians. This species is the most frequently encountered snake in people's homes, especially if the house has an old rock foundation where the snake(s) may be hunting for food or hibernating in the basement. The fox snake is often mistaken for the venomous copperhead snake due to its head color, and subsequently is often killed. Copperheads **do not** live in or near Wisconsin. Fox snakes are also often mistaken for rattlesnakes, as they often 'rattle' their tails in dry leaves, grasses or against objects when disturbed. Their pointed tail distinguishes them (and all other Wisconsin snakes with pointed tails) as a non-venomous species in Wisconsin.

Bullsnake (*Pituophis catenifer*)



Family: Colubridae

Size: 50-80 in.

Status: Protected Wild
Animal



Distribution Map

Description: This is Wisconsin's longest heavy-bodied snake. Its mottled and blotched pattern changes along the length of the snake, often looking like three different snakes connected together. The tail is usually golden with black rings. Blotches along the snake's midsection may vary from black to reddish-brown. The neck region tends to be heavily mottled with black and white. The prominent deep triangular head shape is distinctive. This harmless snake mimics a rattlesnake by shaking its tail in dry vegetation, and may hiss loudly when approached. Unlike the timber rattlesnake, the bullsnake has a heavily patterned head and a pointed tail. Bullsnakes live in sand prairies, oak savannas and in pine and oak barrens. They feed primarily on small mammals and are excellent at controlling pocket gopher populations.

Eastern Milk Snake (*Lampropeltis triangulum*)



Family: Colubridae

Size: 24-36 in.

Status: Common



Distribution Map

Description: This snake has a gray or light brown background color with three rows of reddish-brown or brown blotches bordered with black. There is usually a whitish Y or V shaped marking on the top of its head toward the neck. The underside is white with black rectangular markings. Eastern milk snakes live in oak savannas, northern and southern upland hardwoods, prairies, and old woodlots and pastures. They are also often found around farm buildings and older homes with stone foundations, as well as in vacant lots toward the outskirts of municipalities. Adults feed mostly on rodents but will also eat other small snakes.

Butler's gartersnake (*Thamnophis butleri*)



Family: Colubridae

Size: 15-20 in.

Status: Threatened



Distribution Map

Description: The Butler's gartersnake can be easily confused with the eastern plains gartersnake where their ranges overlap in the seven southeastern counties of Wisconsin. The Butler's tends to be smaller than the eastern plains as an adult. The lateral stripes on the Butler's gartersnake usually occur on scale row three and adjacent halves on rows two and four. The stripes are light yellow to a rich orange-yellow color. Background color is brown, black or olive and there may be a double row of black spots between stripes. This gartersnake has an especially small head and a thick neck. The expert opinion of a gartersnake specialist is needed to positively identify this species because of the many variable characteristics of this species. Butler's gartersnakes live in wet to dry prairies, marshes, old fields, roadside grassy areas and vacant lots. Earthworms form the bulk of their diet.

Eastern Plains gartersnake (*Thamnophis radix*)



Family: Colubridae

Size: 20-28 in.

Status: Locally Common



Distribution Map

Description: This is a medium-sized snake. The yellow to yellow-orange lateral stripes are found on scale rows three and four. Its dorsal background is dark brown to olive, with two rows of alternating dark spots above the lateral stripes and one below. The underside is yellow to yellowish-green with black spots on the outer edge of the belly scales. Eastern plains gartersnakes are found in moist, open grassy areas in prairies and oak savannas and along open river margins. This species appears to hybridize with the Butler's gartersnake in Wisconsin's seven southeastern counties. Their diet consists of frogs, earthworms, salamander larvae, tadpoles, fish and beetles.

Northern Ribbon Snake (*Thamnophis sauritus*)



Family: Colubridae

Size: 18-26 in.

Status: Endangered



Distribution Map

Description: This gartersnake resembles other gartersnakes at first glance, although it is generally much more slender. Its underside is white, often grading into yellow near the tail and its lips are white. Northern ribbon snakes appear to be restricted to sphagnum bogs in south central and eastern Wisconsin and may be found basking in leatherleaf, blueberry, or snowberry brush. Only a hand full of northern ribbon snake occurrences have been documented in Wisconsin. Their diet consists of frogs, salamanders, fish and caterpillars.

Western Ribbon Snake (*Thamnophis proximus*)



Family: Colubridae

Size: 20-30 in.

Status: Endangered



Distribution Map

Description: This snake is similar to the other gartersnakes but is also more slender like the northern ribbon snake. Its lateral stripes are greenish-white and are located on scale rows three and four. Its lip scales and underside are white. Less than a half dozen records exist for this species in Wisconsin, all being found in or adjacent to open, primarily marshy, wetland habitat. Western ribbon snakes feed on tadpoles, newly metamorphosed frogs, small salamanders and fish.

Common gartersnake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*)



Family: Colubridae

Size: 17-26 in.

Status: Common



Distribution Map

Description: As their name suggests, this species is Wisconsin's most abundant snake. They are found in every county of the state and in nearly every habitat type, although they have a preference for forest and woodlot edges and rely heavily on open canopy wetlands for overwintering. They may occasionally be found communally “denning” in very large numbers. Females are generally much longer than males and may occasionally exceed 30” in length. Common gartersnakes look much like other gartersnakes except that their lateral stripes only involve scale rows 1, 2 and 3. Their diet includes frogs, toads, salamanders, fish, earthworms and insects.

This species has a subspecies in extreme southeastern Wisconsin called the Chicago garter that looks quite similar to the common gartersnake.

Brown Snake or DeKay's Snake (*Storeria dekayi*)



Family: Colubridae

Size: 8-15 in.

Status: Common



Distribution Map

Description: This short thick-bodied snake is gray or light brown in color, and is marked with a light mid-dorsal stripe bordered by two rows of small dark spots. The underside is white or light pink with dark pencil-point spots along the edges of the belly scales. Brown snakes live in the surface litter in many habitats, including oak savannas, prairies, southern lowland hardwoods, marshes, old fields, and under rubbish in vacant city lots. Small invertebrates, including slugs, earthworms and snails make up its diet.

Northern Redbelly Snake (*Storeria occipitomaculata*)



Family: Colubridae

Size: 8-10 in.

Status: Common



Distribution Map

Description: This small snake has a reddish-brown to steel gray background color with a broad light mid-dorsal stripe and two narrow darker stripes on each side. The underside is a bright red to orange, edged with dark blue-black. Habitats include boreal forests, sphagnum bogs, and northern and southern hardwood forests and adjacent fields. Redbelly snakes eat slugs, earthworms, and beetle larvae. This species is often seen in large numbers on warm sunny days in September or October basking on back roads and bicycle trails.

Queen Snake (*Regina septemvittata*)



Family: Colubridae

Size: 15-24 in.

Status: Endangered



Distribution Map

Description: This is a medium-sized water snake. Three black stripes run down its brown or gray back and a set of pale yellow stripes run down its sides. There are also two dark stripes on the belly up toward the head region. Queen snakes require clear streams with moderate to fast currents and rocky bottoms. They feed almost exclusively on freshly molted crayfish, although they may eat frogs, tadpoles, newts, minnows, snails and fairy shrimp.

Northern Water Snake (*Nerodia sipedon*)



Family: Colubridae

Size: 24-40 in.

Status: Common



Distribution Map

Description: This is a medium to large heavy-bodied snake. The background color is gray, brown or tan and is marked with dark brown, red-brown or black transverse blotches, which often fade with age. The underside is distinctive, white with bright red half-moons interspersed irregularly with dark gray speckling. Northern water snakes are usually found in or close to any permanent waterbody but they prefer clean rivers. Their diet includes crayfish, slow-moving fish and a variety of amphibians. This non-venomous water snake is often mistaken for a water moccasin and is subsequently killed. Water moccasins, which are venomous, **do not** occur anywhere near Wisconsin.

Venomous Snakes

Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake (*Sistrurus catenatus*)



Family: Viperidae

Size: 20-32 in.

Status: Endangered



Distribution Map

Description: This medium-sized rattlesnake has an especially heavy body. Its background color is tan to light gray with large mid-dorsal, light-edged brown to blackish blotches. Its tail has the appearance of being ringed with wide, blackish bands. A dark stripe runs from each eye onto the neck. The name “massasauga” comes from the Chippewa language and means “great river mouth.” The name was derived from the river bottom lowland forests and associated open wetlands where this species lives. Massasaugas primarily eat small rodents but occasionally feed on amphibians. The massasauga is Wisconsin’s **most endangered** reptile.

Timber Rattlesnake (*Crotalus horridus*)



Family: Viperidae

Size: 36-56 in.

Status: Protected Wild Animal



Distribution Map

Description: This is the larger of the two rattlesnakes and it is also heavy-bodied. Its background color varies from yellow to rust-orange to brown or gray, and is marked with dark brown to black crossbars. The head is normally solid light gold, while the tail is black and capped by a tan rattle. Timber rattlesnakes live among the rugged open bluffs of southwestern and western Wisconsin. Individuals often move into deciduous forests and croplands in the summer. They eat a variety of rodents. This species has experienced heavy human persecution, the primary cause for its listing as a protected wild animal.

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