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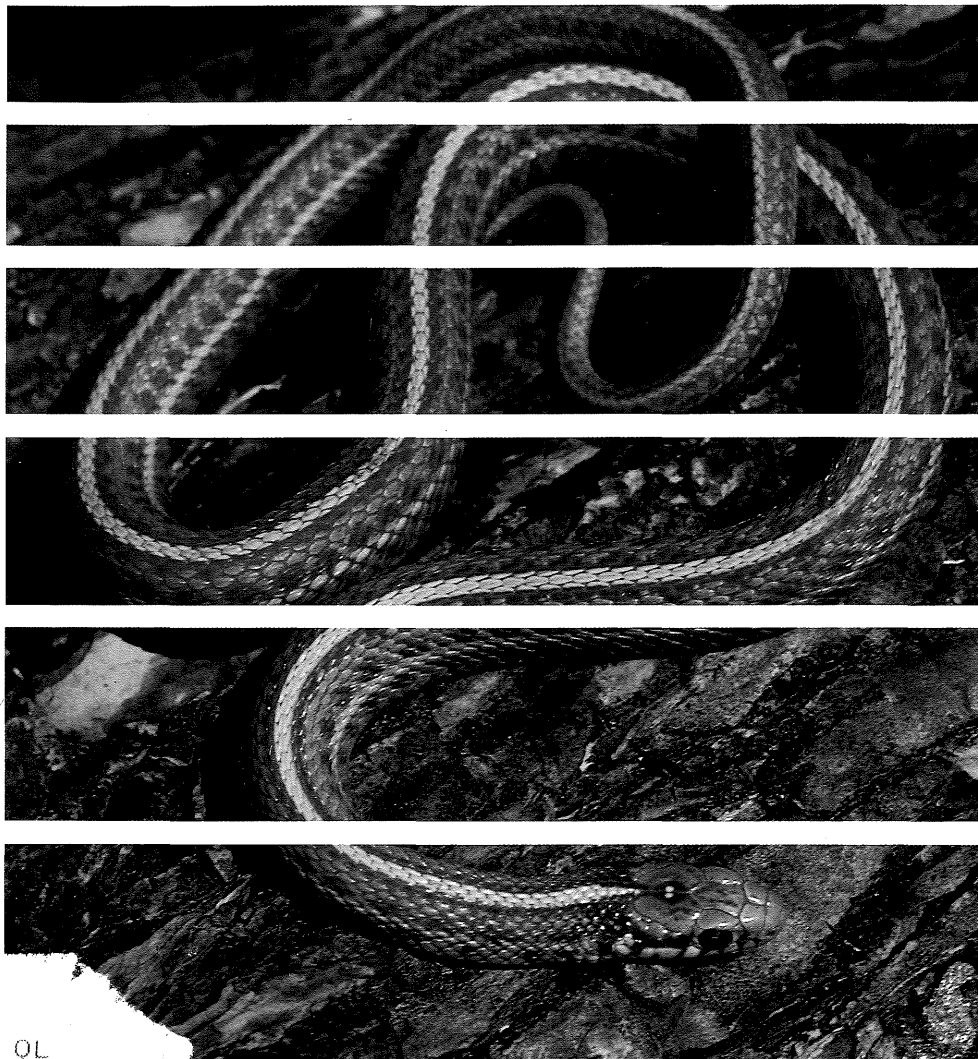
# SNAKES & LIZARDS of Minnesota

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Minnesota Department of Natural Resources



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**Cover photo:** The photo is of a melanistic (lacks black pigment) Plains Garter Snake. This is a rare genetic occurrence, but does occur naturally. The snake was caught in Litchfield, MN.

**Photo:** J. Moriarty

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# SNAKES OF MINNESOTA

Snake! One glimpse of this slithering reptile strikes fear in the hearts of many people, and yet it generates curiosity and intrigue too. The snake family, despite legend, is not evil. The fear remains, however, that snakes are dangerous or venomous and this fear continues to be passed on from parent to child.

Of the 17 snake species found in Minnesota, only two are venomous, the timber rattlesnake and the massasauga. Both are found only in the southeastern counties and are rarely encountered. The massasauga is limited to the backwaters of the Mississippi River. The venomous water moccasin, copperhead and coral snake do NOT live in Minnesota.

The majority of Minnesota snakes are harmless and no Minnesota snake is large enough to hurt a human by squeezing or "constricting." Any snake can bite when cornered or handled incorrectly and large snakes may draw blood. But for the most part, a snake bite is like being pricked by a blackberry bramble. If people leave snakes alone, there is little chance of being bitten. Our state averages only one or two venomous snake bites every five years. However, there is no known fatality from a snake bite in Minnesota.

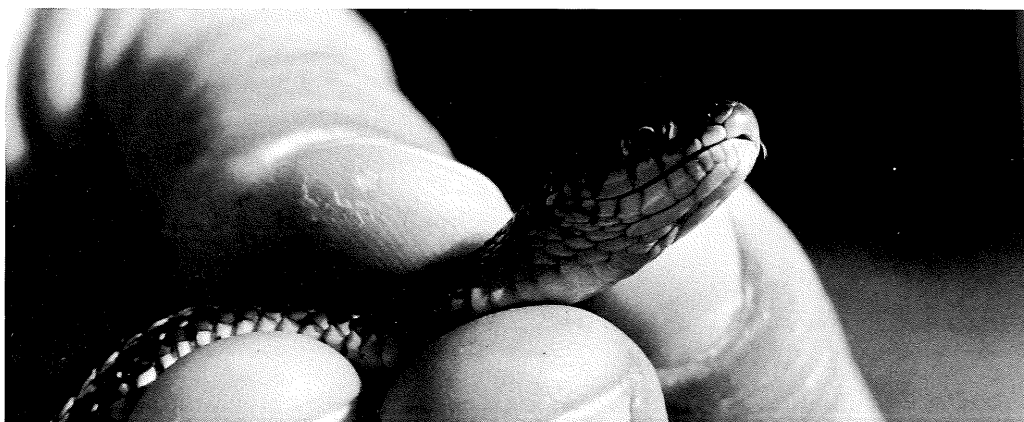
Still, people indiscriminately kill many harmless and beneficial snakes. Snakes play an important role in the environment and all snakes are economically beneficial to humans. Depending on the type of snake, favored food items may include destructive rodents and/or insects. The bull-snake, for example, has quite an appetite for rodents.

As people learn more about snakes, they will appreciate snakes' beneficial ecological roles.



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## SNAKE FACTS

Snakes are reptiles, like lizards and turtles. They are also vertebrates just like birds, fish, amphibians and mammals.

Unlike birds and mammals, snakes do not produce their own body heat. They warm or cool themselves by seeking sun or shade to maintain a stable body temperature.

Snakes have no external ear openings. They are aware of ground vibrations but have minimal hearing of airborne sounds. The snake's tongue assists it in smelling.

Snakes mate in the spring and/or fall. Some lay eggs (oviparous) while others give birth to live young. The live young develop from eggs carried and incubated inside the female (viviparous).

As a snake grows, it sheds its skin to allow for an increase in size. Depending on food supplies and weather conditions, a snake may shed several times each summer.

In winter, snakes hibernate below the frost line for as long as six or seven months. During extremely cold winters with little snow cover, deep-penetrating frosts can kill hibernating snakes.

## LEGAL STATUS OF SNAKES

*In Minnesota, 10 of the 17 species of snakes are currently classified as "special concern" by the state. The major reasons for this classification are habitat loss, indiscriminate killing and over-collecting. The list includes: rat snake, timber rattlesnake, fox snake, milk snake, bullsnake, massasauga, lined snake, blue racer, and eastern and western hognose snake. We must learn to respect and protect our native snakes.*



## TRAPPING AND REMOVAL



Occasionally, snakes will enter a shed, cabin or home to escape the summer heat or look for a place to hibernate for the winter. If this happens to you...DON'T PANIC!! Remember, all but two species of snakes in Minnesota are completely harmless.

The most common species that occurs under steps or in foundations is the garter snake. Snakes can easily be caught and removed from yards or sheds. Unless cornered, snakes will probably flee. If you are hesitant to use your hands to capture an intruding snake, use a rake or shovel to gently lift and carry the snake to another site for release.

If the snake seems to be playing hide-and-seek in your house, try placing a pile of damp burlap sacks on the floor and covering them with dry sacks (to slow evaporation). The snake will be attracted to the cool, damp, dark pile. After a few days or weeks, remove the pile (and snakes) with a scoop shovel.

## PREVENTION / EXCLUSION

There are many ways to reduce the chances of snakes coming to your home. Snakes are attracted not only by cool, damp, dark places but by rodents and insects, their main food source. By reducing rodent habitat, you will reduce snake habitat.

Keep vegetation closely mowed and remove any piles of wood, firewood or rocks that would create habitat for rodents or snakes. Firewood should be stacked on platforms or racks above



ground level. Store grass, bird and other types of seed in secure containers. Check doors and windows for gaps of one-fourth inch Or more. Seal any holes in walls or foundations with mortar or one-fourth inch hardware cloth.

Snakes are rather shy and retiring creatures. They are most frequently seen in the spring as they emerge from hibernation. As the weather warms, snakes will disperse into woods and fields. They are relatively harmless to humans. And, they eat mice, rats, slugs, and many types of harmful insects.

You may find out that snakes are so interesting you'll want to build a hibernaculum (wintering site) for them. Instructions for making a snake hibernaculum are shown in the Minnesota DNR book entitled " Landscaping for Wildlife."

## **Snake Identification**

*Remember, only two species of snakes in Minnesota are venomous; the timber rattlesnake and the massasauga or "swamp rattler". Both species have a limited range in the southeastern part of the state (see distribution map) and both are listed as species of special concern due to loss of habitat and indiscriminate killing (the massasauga is quite uncommon).*

*Minnesota's venomous and nonvenomous snakes can be easily distinguished from a safe distance (snakes can't jump and can only strike a maximum distance of two-thirds of their body length).*

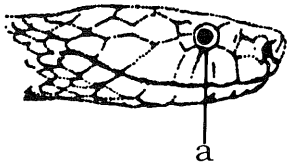
*Venomous snakes have a deep facial pit (hence the name 'pit' viper) on either side of their head. The scales on the underside of their tail, behind the vent, extend back in a single row for most of the tail length. And finally, the pupil of a pit viper's eye is vertically elliptical, like a cat's eye (see diagrams)*



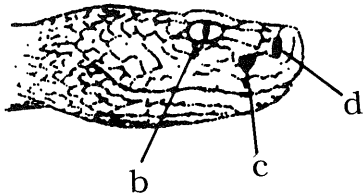
**FIGURES**

**Figure 1:** Identifying venomous and nonvenomous snakes by their heads. Nonvenomous snakes have round pupils (a) and no facial pits. Venomous snakes have an elliptical pupil (b)-like a cat's eye and a deep facial pit (c) on either side of its head close to the nostril (d).

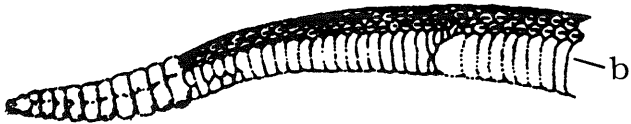
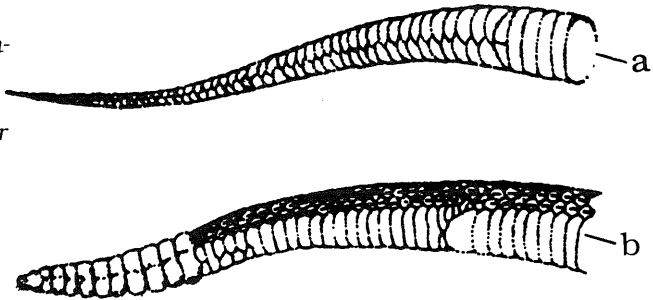
Nonpoisonous Snake



Poisonous Rattlesnake



**Figure 2:** Identifying venomous and nonvenomous snakes by their tail. Nonvenomous snakes have divided scales on the underside of the tail (a). Venomous snakes have undivided scales on the underside of the tail extending in a single row for most of the tail length plus a rattle at the end (b).





# IDENTIFYING MINNESOTA SNAKES

## SMALL SNAKES

**There are five species of snakes in Minnesota that grow no longer than 2 feet.**

### **Brown Snake or DeKay's Snake (up to 13 inches)**

This small, secretive, grayish brown snake inhabits deciduous woodlands, clearings, farm fields and roadsides. It remains hidden during most of the day except when it comes out to sun itself.

In the late afternoon it seeks food, mainly snails, slugs and earthworms. The brown snake has a light stripe down the center of the back with a series of black spots on either side. The belly is pale brown, oatmeal-colored or slightly pinkish. The red-bellied snake is quite similar in appearance but has a more distinctive salmon or reddish belly. Like all reptiles, brown snakes warm or cool themselves by seeking sun or shade.

The brown snake is found in the southern half of the state, excluding the southwestern corner.

### **Lined Snake (up to 15 inches)**

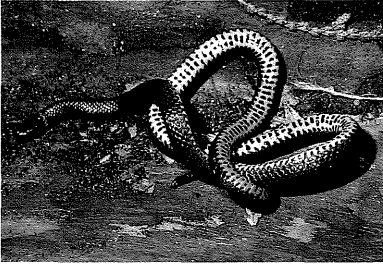
The diminutive, lined snake is similar to a garter snake but with a double row of bold black half-moons on the belly. The mid-dorsal stripe is variable in color and can be whitish, yellow, orange, or light gray on a brownish background.

The secretive lined snake hides under stones, logs, boards, debris or in crevices. Earthworms are its favorite food.





This snake is a species of special concern. Only a few have ever been found. They are known from only one site in southwestern Minnesota. Their preferred habitat is vulnerable to agriculture, residential, and commercial developments.



Oldfield

*Ringneck*

### **Ringneck Snake (up to 16 inches)**

This beautiful snake sports a distinctive, golden collar. It is bluish-gray above with a bright yellow or orange belly. There is usually a row of dark spots along each side of the belly. The ringneck snake inhabits woods, clearings and stoney pastures near woods. It is extremely secretive and spends most of the day hiding beneath stones or under the bark of decaying logs or stumps. It is a nocturnal snake and feeds on insects, earthworms and other small snakes.

The ringneck snake is found in southeastern Minnesota and along the North Shore of Lake Superior.

### **Red-bellied Snake (up to 12 inches)**

The red-bellied snake takes its name from its salmon or red colored underside. Minnesota's shortest snake, it rarely exceeds 12 inches. It is seldom seen due to its color, small size, shyness and nocturnal habits. It feeds on slugs, earthworms, and beetle larvae.

The topside of the red-bellied snake varies from light to dark brown, gray or chestnut. There is a yellowish spot at the back of the neck and on each side which, although not forming a ring resembles a necklace.

Similar to the brown snake, it is found in or near woodlands, with a preference for clearings and openings. It hides during the day under stones, boards or other cover and comes out towards evening. In northern Minnesota, this snake overwinters in the tunnels of ant mounds.

The red-bellied snake is found statewide and appears common in the northern two-thirds of the state.



### **Smooth Green Snake (up to 20 inches)**

The smooth green snake is bright green with a white or yellowish chin and belly. Its long narrow mouth gives it a smiling appearance. A gentle and harmless snake, it has not been known to bite or defend itself when captured. Its only protection is camouflage and speed.

This slender snake is seldom seen because it blends well with its green, grassy habitat. It is so slender and delicate that even those who do not like snakes admit that it is beautiful.

This little snake is of economic importance because it feeds on insects, grubs and worms, especially grasshoppers, crickets, caterpillars and spiders. These habits should make it welcome to anyone's garden.

The smooth green snake is found statewide except northeast of a line from Lake of the Woods to Duluth.



Oldfield

*Smooth Green Snake*



## MEDIUM-SIZE SNAKES

There are six species of snakes in Minnesota that are medium-sized, between 2 and 3 feet long.

### **Common Garter Snake** (up to 23 inches)

Most everyone has seen a garter snake. It is found statewide and is our most common snake. Some people call it a "garden" or "grass" snake. It may be found in woods, meadows, wetlands and in city lots.

Common garter snakes can be identified by three, long yellowish stripes on a dark background. The belly is usually yellowish or greenish. A subspecies of the common garter snake, the red-sided garter snake is also found throughout the state.

Garter snakes feed chiefly on earthworms, frogs, toads, minnows, salamanders and, occasionally, small rodents and insects.

These snakes do not lay eggs but give birth to live young. The young may number six to 73 in a litter and are born between July and September. Although they may be found near the mother after birth, no parental care is given. The young snakes are marked similarly to the adults.

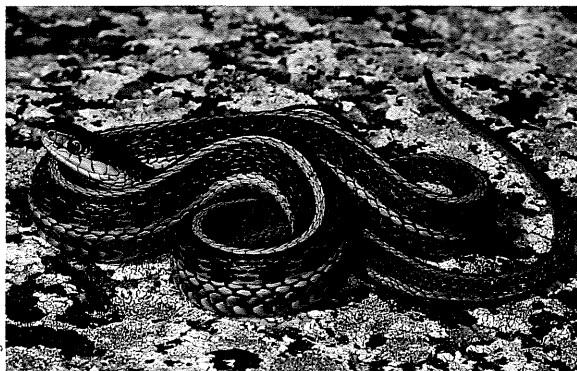
Garter snakes are not aggressive — but they may bite if handled or cornered. The bite usually amounts to no more than a few scratches. They also release a foul-smelling musk odor from their scent glands when handled.

### **Plains Garter Snake** (up to 28 inches)

The plains garter snake is very similar to the common garter snake. It too has three vertical stripes, the middle one being bright yellow or orange and the side ones of a greenish or bluish hue. The plains garter snake also has a double, alternating row of spots between stripes. It is more commonly found around marshes or pond edges, and is also associated with prairie habitats.

The favored food of the plains garter snake is frogs, but insects and other small creatures are also eaten.

This snake is found throughout the state, except for the northeast corner.



Oldfield

*Common Garter Snake*





*Western Hognose Snake*

### **Eastern Hognose Snake (up to 33 inches)**

This harmless snake is often called a "blow snake" or "puff adder."

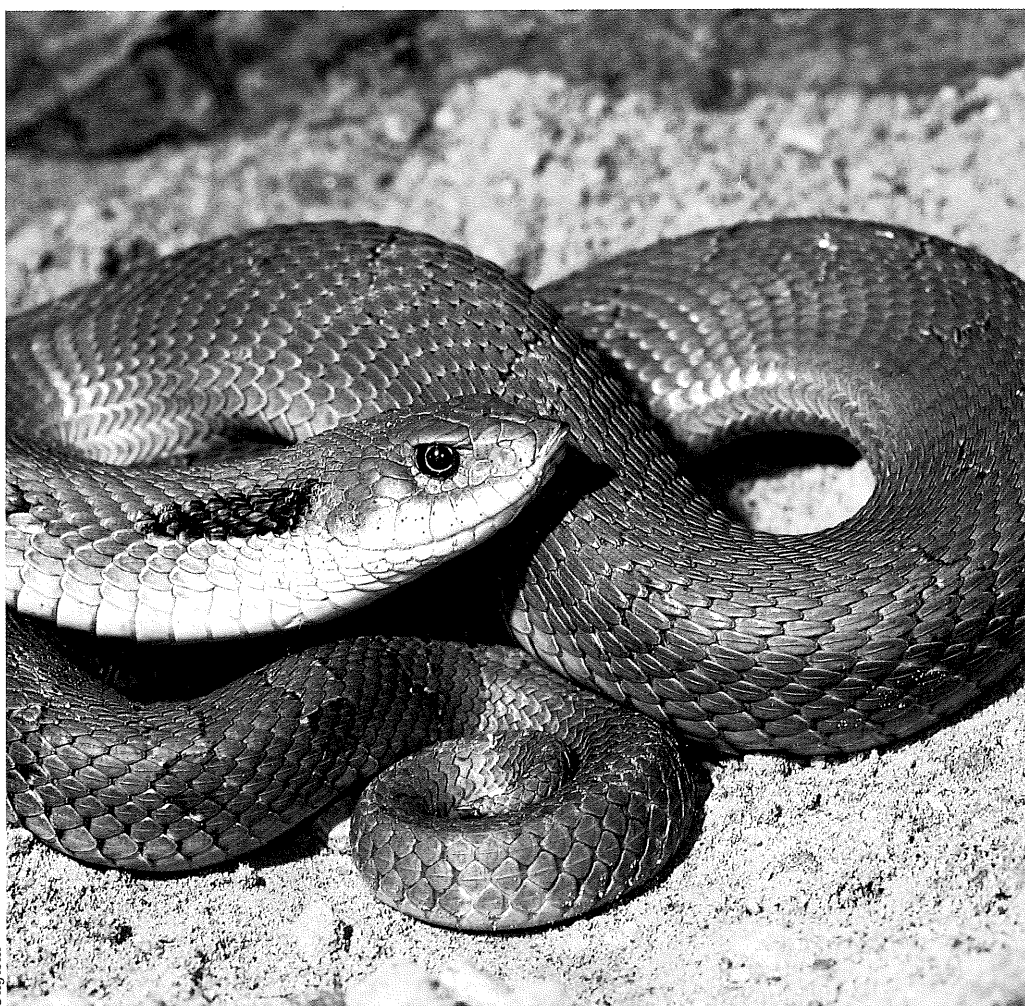
It is a great bluffer and might be considered the star performer of the snake kingdom. When disturbed, this snake will hiss loudly and flatten its head and neck like a cobra. If threatened further, it may strike — but with its mouth closed. If this does not scare enemies away, it will roll over, lay belly-up and play dead. Unfortunately, this act of mock ferocity often causes people to kill this harmless snake by mistakenly thinking it is dangerous.

The eastern hognose snake is named for its upturned snout. It is a thick-bodied snake with a broad head. The color is variable but commonly olive green, brownish, gray or slate. Usually this snake has large, dark brown spots, but dark-colored specimens may appear almost solid-colored.

This snake prefers sandy places, beaches and light, dry woods. It feeds chiefly on toads. The upturned snout is thought to be used in digging to obtain food.

The eastern hognose snake is found in east central Minnesota and the extreme southeastern counties. It is listed as a state species of special concern.





Oldfield

*Eastern Hognose Snake*



### **Western Hognose Snake (up to 35 inches)**

This snake is similar to the eastern hognose snake in appearance and habitats. It is generally lighter in color with smaller, round, brown spots on a grey background. The snout is more sharply upturned.

In some parts of its range, this snake is called the "prairie rooter".

The western hognose is not as good an actor as its eastern cousin when it comes to spreading its head and hissing, but it will still feign death with its belly up and mouth open.

In Minnesota, this species is found in the western and east central parts of the state. The western hognose snake prefers sandy, graveled areas that occur in grassland, prairie and mixed forest/prairie habitats. It, too, is listed by the state as a species of special concern.

### **Milk Snake (up to 36 inches)**

The milk snake is one of our most beautiful and beneficial snakes. Its common name comes from a foolish superstition. Because this snake frequently is seen around barns in search of mice, it was often accused of milking cows, especially if the cows gave less milk than usual.

The milk snake is slender and strongly patterned. The background color is usually tan or grayish, with large blotches on the top alternating with smaller spots that are maroon to reddish in color, with black borders. The top of the head is often marked with a light-colored pattern in the shape of the letter Y.

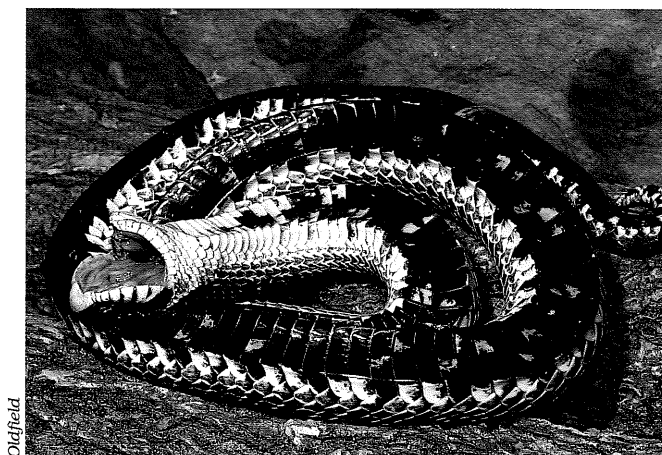
Milk snakes are most often found in old woodlots and pastures adjacent to small streams and marshes. They also frequent barns, sheds and other areas where grain is stored, in search of mice.

Mice provide over 70 percent of this snake's food. It also eats lizards and other small snakes.

Unfortunately, the milk snake is often mistaken for a rattlesnake, not only because of its mottled appearance but also because it will vibrate its tail if frightened or cornered. If the tail is vibrated among dry leaves, a buzzing sound may be produced, even though there are no rattles on the tail. This snake is also killed because of its superficial resemblance to the copperhead.

The milk snake is found in the southern third of the state except in the extreme western part. This snake is a state species of special concern.





Oldfield

*Western Hognose Snake*



Oldfield

*Milk Snake*



**Massasauga** (up to 30 inches)

The massasauga or "swamp rattler" is one of the two venomous snakes in the state. This snake is very rare and its occurrence in Minnesota is based on a few records from Wabasha County and Houston County.

The massasauga is a stout-bodied snake with a head that is broad and distinct. It has large, rounded black spots on a gray-colored back. The rattle on the end of the tail is distinctive. A new button is added to the rattle each time the snake sheds.

The favored habitat of the massasauga is near swamps and bogs where it can obtain frogs and mice.

This is a species of special concern because of its very local occurrence based on a few records, its vulnerability to destruction because it is venomous, and the loss of its river bottom habitat to drainage and filling.



*Massasauga*

*For more information on snakes, contact the Minnesota Herpetological Society, Bell Museum of Natural History, 10 Church Street S.E., Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455-1014; the Minnesota DNR Nongame Wildlife Program, 500 Lafayette Road, St. Paul, Minnesota 55155-4007; or the DNR Nongame Wildlife Regional Specialist in your area.*



## LARGE SNAKES

There are six species of snakes in Minnesota that can grow to a length of 3 feet or more. Five are species of special concern because of their vulnerability to collecting and their susceptibility to over-collecting and destruction

### **Bullsnake** (up to 72 inches)

The bullsnake is Minnesota's largest snake. It is colored yellowish to buff-brown with a series of black or brown blotches on its back that are darkest and in strongest contrast with the background color at both ends of the snake.

When disturbed, the bullsnake tries to escape. When cornered, it hisses loudly, vibrates its tail, opens its mouth and boldly strikes. Because of this aggressive behavior, many bullsnakes are killed by people convinced the snake is dangerous and perhaps a rattler. The bullsnake is not dangerous to people. It is a beneficial ally, especially for grain farmers who value this snake's capacity for consuming destructive rodents.

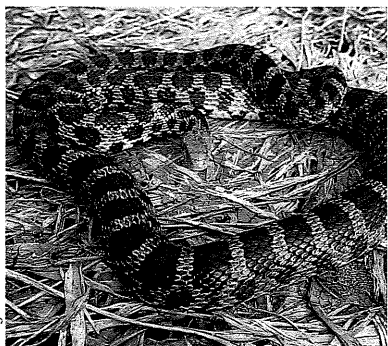
The bullsnake's diet consists mostly of small mammals, but they also eat some birds and their eggs.

The bullsnake occurs in the southern half of the state. It is a species of special concern.



*Bullsnake*





*Fox Snake*

### **Fox Snake** (up to 54 inches)

The fox snake is so named because it secretes a strong-smelling fluid suggestive of the odor of foxes. The fox snake is harmless but often mistakenly killed by those who do not know what it is. This snake also vibrates its tail when annoyed, causing people to think that it is a rattlesnake.

The fox snake is yellowish in color with large dark saddles and side blotches. The head is a distinct bronze color.

The fox snake is associated with woody rock bluffs along larger streams and the adjacent moist lowlands. Rodents form the bulk of its diet, but it may also eat amphibians, lizards or small birds.

The fox snake occurs in the southern half of Minnesota. It is a species of special concern.

### **Black Rat Snake** (up to 72 inches)

The black rat snake is sometimes called the "pilot snake" because of a superstitious belief that it will lead other snakes to safety in times of danger. It is a plain, shiny black snake with a white or cream-colored chin and throat. The color between the black scales of the body is yellowish or sometimes reddish.

The black rat snake, a woodland snake, frequents moist forests and forest edges during the summer months. It moves to rocky outcrops or bluffs in the fall and spring. This snake is a good climber and may be found high up in trees where it can retreat to tree cavities.

Like many other rodent-eating snakes, the black rat snake will vibrate its tail in imitation of a rattler.

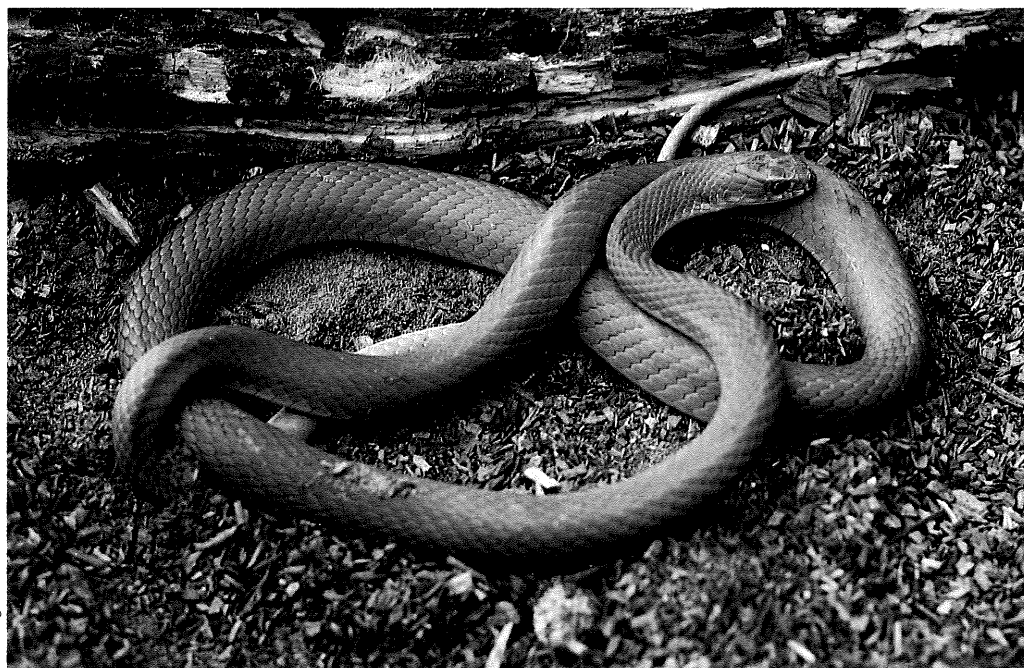
This species is rare in Minnesota. It has been reported only in Houston, Winona and Olmsted counties. The black rat snake is listed as a species of special concern.



### **Blue Racer** (up to 60 inches)

The blue racer is a fast-moving snake that is almost impossible to catch. It is an attractive, slender snake that is plain blue above, white on its chin and throat, and yellowish along its belly. The shade of blue above is variable; it may be greenish or grayish with the head being darker. Very often, an even darker area extends backward from the eye.

The blue racer occupies a variety of habitats in the deciduous forest regions of Minnesota, including forested hillsides, bluff prairies, grasslands and open woods. It feeds on rodents, reptiles, amphibians and insects. As insects and rodents are its chief food source, it is an economically beneficial creature. The blue racer is found only in the southeastern counties of the state. It is a species of special concern.



Moriarty

*Blue Racer*



*If you have questions or information about one of these rare, threatened, endangered, or special concern species, please contact your area Nongame Wildlife Specialist*



*Northern Water Snake*

### **Northern Water Snake (up to 42 inches)**

Although many snakes readily take to the water, the northern water snake is the only Minnesota snake that is highly aquatic and an excellent diver. This harmless snake is often mistaken for the venomous water moccasin and killed on sight. Water moccasins have never been native to Minnesota and our water snakes are in no way related to them.

The northern water snake is stout-bodied with a large head that is broad through the jaws. It has a dark brown body with faint brown markings. The belly may be colorful; creamy, yellowish or reddish with dusky mottling.

This snake is never found far from lakes, streams, ponds or marshes. It sleeps and hibernates on dry land and restricts itself to a small home area that it inhabits year after year.

The water snake feeds primarily on fish, frogs, salamanders and crayfish.

The northern water snake is found in the southeastern and east central parts of the state.



**Timber Rattlesnake** (up to 54 inches)

The timber rattlesnake, one of two venomous snakes that occur in Minnesota, is sometimes also called the “banded” rattler.

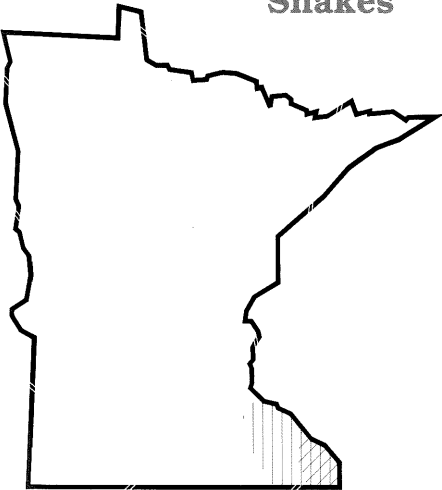
In Minnesota, this snake is yellowish with black or dark brown crossbands. The timber rattlesnake can always be identified by the presence of a “rattle” at the end of the tail, the wide head with a narrow neck, the deep facial pit on each side of the head between the eye and nostril, and the vertical pupil of the eye. The head of this snake has no markings.



The timber rattlesnake inhabits deciduous forests, croplands, and bottomlands along river valleys in the summer. In the spring and fall, it is more likely to be seen near steep, rugged bluffs, rock ledges and outcrops near overwintering dens.

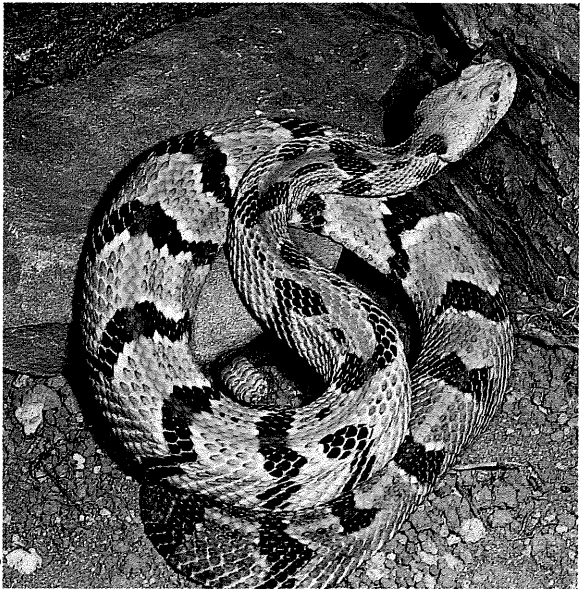
Rodents and small birds are the chief foods of the timber rattlesnake.

The timber rattlesnake is found along the Mississippi River Valley in southeastern Minnesota north to Washington County (see map). This snake is listed by the state as a species of special concern.

**Poisonous Minnesota  
Snakes**



-  Timber Rattlesnake
-  Massasauga



Outfield

*Timber Rattlesnake*






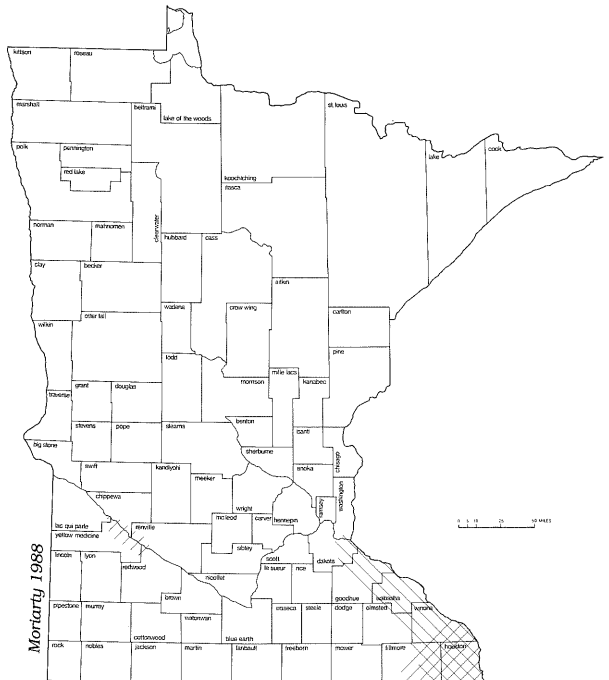
# MINNESOTA LIZARDS

Lizards, like snakes, are reptiles. They regulate their body temperature by seeking sun or shade. They have slender, smooth-scaled bodies and reproduce by laying eggs. Unlike snakes, lizards have external ear openings and eyelids that move! Some lizards also have a curious escape mechanism whereby their tail breaks off if a predator grabs them. However, this tailless condition is not permanent. Over time the tail grows back although sometimes a little shorter!

There are three species of lizards in Minnesota—the northern prairie skink, the 5-lined skink and the 6-lined racerunner.

## Minnesota Lizards

-  6-Lined Racerrunner
-  5-Lined Skink
-  Prairie Skink







*Northern Prairie Skink*



*Hatchling*

## Northern Prairie Skink

The northern prairie skink, also known as the black-banded skink, is the most common skink in Minnesota. They have smooth, shiny scales and grow up to 7 inches. The northern prairie skink is identified by three wide, tan to light brown stripes, separated by two narrow black stripes along the length of the back. Its sides are marked by three black stripes separated by two narrow white stripes. The head is tan and the unmarked belly is tan to light gray. Juveniles have bright blue-black tails.

Prairie skinks are active from May through September. They are often found in sandy areas such as stream banks or openings in pine barrens and grasslands. As the weather turns cold, they retreat deep into burrows to hibernate for the winter.

Their diet includes grasshoppers, crickets, tree and leaf hoppers, beetles, caterpillars, and spiders.

## 5-Lined Skink

The 5-lined skink is called the bluedevil or blue-tailed skink, and grows to 7 inches in length. It is an endangered species in Minnesota. Although quite common in the east central and southern United States, one of its populations in Minnesota is



isolated from other 5-lined skink populations by about 150 miles. This is known as a "disjunct" population.

Juvenile, 5-lined skinks and adult female, 5-lined skinks are easily recognized by the five distinct yellow stripes that run down the back of their black, shiny bodies. This dorsal stripe forms a "Y" on top of the head. Their tails are bright metallic blue, somewhat like that of the young, northern prairie skink. As the males mature, their color fades to brown, their tails turn gray and their stripes become barely visible. During the mating season, however, their head and lips (labial scales) turn bright red.

Five-lined skinks live on south-facing, rocky outcrops, in old woodlots, along moist forest edges, and in openings in pine barrens, oak savannas and dry northern hardwood forests. In Minnesota, they have been found on granite outcrops along the Minnesota River Valley near Granite Falls, (Yellow Medicine County) and in southeastern Minnesota in Houston and Fillmore counties.

Like prairie skinks, 5-lined skinks feed on a variety of invertebrates such as spiders, crickets, locusts, beetles, beetle larvae, caterpillars, and even snails.



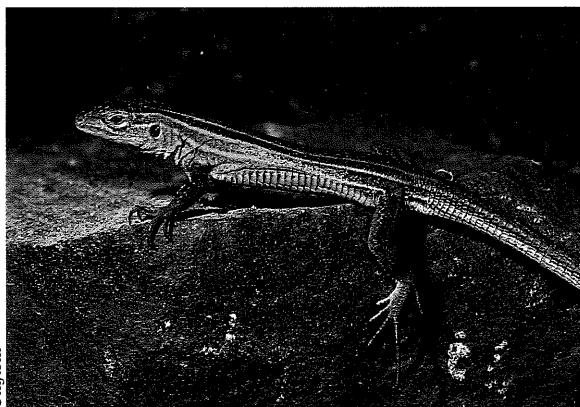
Oldfield

*Five-lined Skink*





*Hatchling*



*Six-lined Racerunner*

### **6-Lined Racerunner**

The six-lined racerunner, is a quick, slender lizard found on the hillsides of dry prairies and in dry-mesic prairies above the Mississippi River floodplains south from Dakota County.

It grows to 9.5 inches in length. It has six, light yellow or yellow-green dorsal stripes along its brown or dark brown body and bright green or yellow-green sides. The adult's rough-scaled tail is usually gray or light brown in contrast to the juvenile's pale, powdery blue-green tail.

Their diet consists of grasshoppers, crickets, wasps, moths, butterflies, caterpillars, and flies.



For more information about snakes, other reptiles and amphibians, see one of these excellent references:

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**The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Reptiles and Amphibians.**  
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Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (3rd printing).

Conant, R. 1975.  
**A Field Guide to the Reptiles and Amphibians of Eastern and Central North America.**  
2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Peterson Field Guide Series.

Preston, W.B. 1982.  
**Amphibians and Reptiles of Manitoba.**  
Winnipeg: Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature.

Smith, H.M. 1978.  
**A Guide to Field Identification-Amphibians of North America.**  
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New York: Golden Press.

Vogt, R.C. 1981.  
**Natural History of Amphibians and Reptiles of Wisconsin.**  
Milwaukee: Milwaukee Public Museum.



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