



Eastern Fox Snake (*Pantherophis vulpinus*)

Pan-ther-o-phis vul-pine-iss



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Adults (top), Juvenile (bottom)

Harmless/Nonvenomous

Description: 36 to 54 inches. The eastern fox snake is a large, moderately built snake with weakly keeled scales. Ground color can range from yellowish, light brown, to reddish brown with 3 rows of alternating black, brown, to reddish brown blotches. Heads of adult specimens are usually reddish-orange and unpatterned or faintly patterned, almost always with a pair of dark oblong blotches on the neck. The belly is usually a dirty yellow and black “checkerboard” pattern. Juvenile specimens lack the reddish-orange heads of adults, have a much more pronounced ocular stripe, and strongly resemble juvenile midland rat snakes (*Pantherophis spiloides*). Juvenile fox snakes are heavier bodied than midland rat snakes, however.

Scales: Semi-keeled

Anal Plate: Divided

Taxonomy and Classification:

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Serpentes

Infraorder: Alethinophidia

Family: Colubridae

Subfamily: Colubrinae

Genus: Pantherophis

Species: *Pantherophis vulpinus**

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Similar/Confusing Species: Milk snakes (*Lampropeltis triangulum*) have smooth scales, and an undivided anal plate. Bullsnares (*Pituophis catenifer sayi*) have non-uniform blotching over the body, more heavily

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mottled heads, an enlarged rostral scale, and an undivided anal plate. Northern/common water snakes (*Nerodia sipedon*) often have cross banding on the anterior third of the body, and reddish to reddish brown half moon shaped markings on the ventral surface. Juvenile midland/gray ratsnakes (*Pantherophis spiloides*) are somewhat more slender in body, and have darker, more irregular dorsal and lateral blotches, in addition to having a more limited range in Wisconsin. Juvenile racers (*Coluber constrictor*) have busier reddish blotches or mottling, and a tapering pattern towards the tail.

Etymology: Pantherophis-Unknown. vulpine/vulpinus-of foxes.

Subspecies: None.

Range & Habitat: Locally common throughout most of Wisconsin, but uncommon and locally distributed in the southeastern quarter. In Wisconsin, eastern fox snakes occur in prairies, meadows, oak savannahs, pine barrens, forest, and woodlot edges often near water (particularly marshes, backwaters, and along riverways). *Note that according to some range maps, there may also be areas of overlap or integration with the Western Foxsnake (*Pantherophis ramspotti*) along the Mississippi River in western Wisconsin along the Iowa and Minnesota borders.

Habits & Natural History: The eastern fox snake is among the more widespread and commonly encountered large snake species in Wisconsin, where they are often referred to by locals as “pine snakes” or “bullsnakes”, the first of which are actually a different genus and species not found in Wisconsin. Fox snakes are highly beneficial rodent predators, feeding on rodents and other small mammals as well as small birds and occasionally amphibians. Unfortunately, this species’ reddish-orange head often causes it to be confused with a copperhead and persecuted. Copperheads *do not* occur anywhere in or near Wisconsin, however. Fox snakes may rapidly vibrate their tails in vegetation when agitated, but are harmless and non-venomous snakes that do not pose a threat to humans. Eastern fox snakes are oviparous, or egg laying.

Phenology: Eastern fox snakes emerge from overwintering as early as mid to late April or May, and remain active throughout the year through late September or October (or even later into the year if warmer temperatures persist or otherwise permit).

Conservation Status: WI Locally Common, but subject to, and regulated by the WI DNR. IUCN Red List Least Concern/Near Threatened (LC/NT).

Contact

Authored by Eric Roscoe. For any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns regarding this species, group of species, or this informational sheet, please email and contact the Madison Area Herpetological Society at info@madisonherps.org

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