



Eastern Massasauga (*Sistrurus catenatus*)

Sis-tru-rus cat-eh-nay-tus



**Sam Fellows*

****Although Eastern massasaugas are one of two venomous species in the state of Wisconsin, and have a potent venom, they are also perhaps among the rarest and most critically endangered reptiles in the state, being found only in a small number of remote, isolated pockets of west central Wisconsin. Most, if not all verified bites from this species in the state have occurred when these snakes were formerly historically abundant. These snakes tend to be shy and avoid humans whenever possible. Most venomous snakebites occur when attempting to handle, molest, or harass the animal or when accidentally stepped on. Knowing and maintaining adequate levels of awareness in areas where venomous species may occur, and acting accordingly will greatly reduce negative human-snake encounters.***

Description: 20 to 32 inches in length. The eastern massasauga is a small, heavy bodied species of pit viper with a ground color of light to dark brown to grayish brown, and a row of darker brown or black “hourglass” or “bow tie” shaped dorsal blotches. Three rows of darker lateral blotches are also present on each lateral side. Some specimens may be melanistic, or obscured by very dark pigmentation. The tail is typically banded, and the distinct multi segmented rattle is usually lighter colored. Dark brown to black post ocular stripes characterized by lighter borders characterize the broad head with 9 large scutes atop the crown, and distinct heat pits on the loreals. The ventral surface is usually blackish to gray with dark mottling on the anterior.

Scales: Keeled

Anal Plate: Undivided

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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: Viperidae

Subfamily: Crotalinae

Genus: *Sistrurus*

Species: *Sistrurus catenatus**

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Similar/Confusing Species: Timber rattlesnakes (*Crotalus horridus*), the other of Wisconsin's two venomous snake species, tends to generally be larger, and lacks the large scutes atop the head/crown. All other species of harmless and non-venomous snakes in Wisconsin lack rattles, loreal heat pits, and have two rows of sub-caudal scales.

Etymology: *Sistrurus*- *Sistrum* (a rattle) *oura* (tail). *catenatus*-*catena* (chain); *atus* (pertaining to, or having the nature of).

Subspecies: Eastern massasauga (*Sistrurus c. catenatus*).

Range & Habitat: Formerly ranged over most of southern and central Wisconsin, but the range has diminished considerably, and now only occurs in isolated pockets in southeastern, western and west central portions. The eastern massasauga favors open canopy sedge meadows, lowland wet prairies, fens, bogs, and adjacent upland fields and prairies along rivers, marshes, and other wetlands.

Habits & Natural History: Once extremely abundant in southern and central Wisconsin, populations of the eastern massasauga, or "swamp rattler", which is one of two venomous snake species in Wisconsin, have been eliminated or reduced substantially across the state of Wisconsin from historic levels due to outright persecution, habitat loss, degradation, or fragmentation, and illegal collection. The eastern massasauga is now a candidate for both state and federal endangered species status, and may be Wisconsin's most endangered reptile. These small, heavily bodied rattlesnakes begin to emerge in April or May, and may remain active as late as October, where their seasonal movements and habitat preferences often depend on the age, gender, and reproductive status of individual snakes. While eastern massasugas do carry medically significant venom to humans, they are no longer abundant by any means, and bites and fatalities from this species are exceedingly rare, with most occurring prior to the early 1900s. The eastern massasauga's rattle is tiny, and oftentimes barely audible, often sounding

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more like that of a buzzing insect. As with other rattlesnakes, massasaugas are ovoviviparous, or live bearing.

Phenology: Eastern massasaugas 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 State Endangered. Regulated by the WI DNR. IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

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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