



## Eastern Red backed Salamander (*Plethodon cinereus*)

*Pleth-o-don sin-ur-us*



*Need Photos of Leadback Phase*

**Description:** The Eastern red backed salamander is a small, slender bodied salamander ranging from 2 ½ to 4 inches in length. Ground color can be a pale to dark gray along the sides (laterals), often with light colored flecking present. A wide reddish to reddish orange dorsal stripe is present on most specimens, although some, such as “leadback” phases, may have a darker brown or absent stripe. Costal grooves are also present.

### **Taxonomy and Classification:**

**Life:** All living, physical, and animate entities

**Domain:** Eukaryota

**Kingdom:** Animalia

**Phylum:** Chordata/Vertebrata

**Class:** Amphibia

**Order:** Caudata/Urodela

**Suborder:** Salamandroidea

**Family:** Plethodontidae

**Genus:** Plethodon

**Species:** *Plethodon cinereus*\*

*\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

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**Similar/Confusing Species:** Four toed salamanders (*Hemidactylium scutatum*) have four toes present on the hind feet, and a constricted tail base with a brighter yellowish, orangish, to reddish-brown tail.

**Etymology:** Plethodon-Pletho (crowd, multitude, fullness) odon (tooth). cinereus-ash colored or gray.

**Subspecies:** None.

**Range & Habitat:** Red backed salamanders generally occur in the northern third of Wisconsin, but may extend further south in extreme eastern portions along Lake Michigan. These salamanders are forest and woodland species, being found in northern mixed to mesic forests and woodlots.

**Habits & Natural History:** Red backed salamanders are a small, slender bodied plethodontid salamander that can be very abundant in suitable northern forest habitats. They will often occupy moist to semi moist microhabitats including underneath rocks, logs, fallen bark, and other forest floor debris. Unlike many other salamanders, lungless species such as the red backed salamander reproduce and lay eggs in moist rock or log crevices rather than in temporary ephemeral wetlands, and also lack a separate larval stage. Red backed salamanders may also practice caudal autotomy (shedding of their tails) to avoid predation, and in turn feed on tiny insects and isopods, which are important for nutrient cycling and overall forest ecosystem health.

**Phenology:** Red backed salamanders begin emerging from overwintering during the first warm rains of late March, April, or early May and remain active throughout the year through September or October (or even later if warmer temperatures persist or otherwise permit).

**Conservation Status:** WI Common with no special protections, but 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](mailto:info@madisonherps.org)

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