



Gopher Snake (*Pituophis catenifer* ssp.)

Pit-u-o-fiss –ca-ten-if-fer say-e



Harmless/Nonvenomous

Description: 48 to 72 inches. The Gopher snake is a large, fairly heavily built snake with semi keeled scales. The anterior third of the body tends to be dark and heavily mottled with black and white, grading into a lighter tan to light brown ground color at mid body, with three rows of alternating darker brown to reddish brown blotches. The posterior third of the body and tail then usually grades into a golden to yellow ground color with black to darker brown, alternating blotches, rings, and saddles. The head is relatively small, wedge shaped, and heavily mottled, often with a dark ocular band and somewhat upturned rostral scale. The belly, or ventral surface tends to be cream colored, tan, to pinkish, sometimes with dark, scattered blotches or mottling.

Scales: Semi-Keeled

Anal Plate: Undivided

Taxonomy and Classification:

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Serpentes

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Infraorder: Alethinophidia

Family: Colubridae

Subfamily: Colubrinae

Genus: Pituophis

Species: *Pituophis catenifer**

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Similar/Confusing Species: Milk snakes (*Lampropeltis triangulum*) have smooth scales and uniform blotches throughout the body. Eastern fox snakes (*Pantherthopis vulpinus*) have uniform blotches throughout the body, unmottled or faintly mottled heads, lack an enlarged rostral scale, and divided anal plates. Northern/common water snakes (*Nerodia sipedon*) have reddish to reddish brown half-moons and mottling on a pale ventral surface, and divided anal plates. Eastern hognose snakes (*Heterodon platirhinos*) have more distinctly upturned rostral scales, elaborate bluffing and death feigning behaviors, and divided anal plates.

Etymology: Pituophis- Pityos (pine) ophis (serpent) or pituitaris (phlegm). catenifer-catena (chain); ifera (bearing or holding). sayi (in honor of Thomas Say, 1787-1834).

Subspecies: Bullsnake (*Pituophis catenifer sayi*).

Range & Habitat: Primarily occupies the driftless region of southwestern and western Wisconsin along the Wisconsin and Mississippi rivers. In Wisconsin, gopher snakes are most often associated with dry, sandy soil habitats such as sand prairies, oak savannahs, old fields and meadows, agricultural areas, pine barrens, and bluff prairies. The Jefferson County record(s) in Southeastern Wisconsin noted on the WI Herp Atlas may be old and/or disjunct records.

Habits & Natural History: Bullsnaakes, a subspecies of the gopher snake, are the largest species of snake in Wisconsin, capable of reaching 6 to 7 feet in length. A strong constrictor, they are extremely beneficial rodent predators, thereby saving the homeowner, farmer, or gardener much expense in rodent control. Although nonvenomous, bullsnaakes will rapidly vibrate their tails in dry vegetation and produce a loud raspy sounding hiss when disturbed. This defensive display unfortunately often causes the bullsnaake to be mistaken for a venomous species and persecuted. Other threats currently facing bullsnaakes in Wisconsin include habitat loss, and fragmentation. Bullsnaakes, or gopher snakes, are oviparous, or egg laying, laying eggs in rotten stumps or logs or edges of sand blows.

Phenology: Bullsnaakes 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 "Protected Wild Animal". Regulated by the WI DNR. IUCN Red List Least Concern (LC).

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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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