



Midland/Gray Rat Snake (*Pantherophis spiloides*)

Pan-ther-o-phis spih-lo-uh-deez



*Mike Day

Description: 36 to 72 inches in length. The midland, or gray rat snake is a large, moderately built snake with weakly keeled scales. As hatchlings and juveniles, midland rat snakes have a ground color ranging

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from gray, tan, to light brown with three rows of darker, alternating dark brown to black dorsal blotches. A dark ocular stripe is also often present. Juvenile rat snakes may be confused with juvenile fox snakes (*Pantherophis vulpina*), but are somewhat more slender bodied, with darker blotches. Patterning usually fades into adulthood in most specimens, with adults ranging from black to grayish, with patterning absent or inconspicuous. There may be yellowish, reddish, or whitish flecks in between scalation. The head is dark and unpatterned, with lighter colored labial scales. The ventral surface is usually a dirty cream color with dark, scattered checkerboard patterning fading into gray to black toward the anterior.

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 spiloides**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Similar/Confusing Species: Milk snakes (*Lampropeltis triangulum*) have smooth scales, deeper red or reddish dorsal and lateral blotches as juveniles, and undivided anal plates. Juvenile eastern fox snakes (*Pantherophis vulpinus*) are somewhat heavier bodied, and have rounder, darker brown to blackish dorsal and lateral blotches. Racers (*Coluber constrictor*) have smooth, sleek scales.

Etymology: Pantherophis-Unknown. spiloides-spilos (spot, speck, or blemish); eidos (form or reference).

Subspecies: None.

Range & Habitat: Occurs primarily within the driftless region of extreme western and southwestern Wisconsin. Primarily a forest and woodland dwelling species in Wisconsin, this snake occurs in oak forests and woodlands associated with unglaciated bluffs and river valleys, but may also be found in surrounding bluff prairies, pastures, and residential areas.

Habits & Natural History: A medium to large species formerly known as the “black rat snake”, this species has since underwent taxonomic reclassification, and is now known as the “midland” or “gray” rat snake. A strong constrictor, the midland rat snake tends to be the most arboreal (tree dwelling) species

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of snake in Wisconsin, often scaling trees, rock outcrops and cliff faces, barns, sheds, and other structures and out buildings in search of rodents, small birds, and bird eggs. Midland rat snakes may rapidly vibrate their tails in dry vegetation when disturbed, and may react defensively by striking and emitting a foul smelling musk. However, this species is harmless and beneficial to humans, and often consumes large quantities of rodents. They also undergo a considerable ontogenetic color and pattern change from juveniles to adults. Ovoviviparous, or egg laying.

Phenology: Midland/gray ratsnakes 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).

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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