



### **North American Racer (*Coluber constrictor* ssp.)**

*Coll-oo-ber con-strik-tor fox-eye and Coll-oo-ber con-strik-tor fla-vee-ven-tris*



*Adults (top), Juvenile (bottom)*

#### ***Harmless/Nonvenomous***

**Description:** 36 to 72 inches, but usually smaller. Racers are a fairly large, slender bodied snake with smooth scales, giving them a sleek appearance. As juveniles, racers range from 6-12 inches, and may be

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tan to cream colored with heavy reddish to reddish brown blotches and mottling, and strongly resemble juvenile eastern milk snakes (*Lampropeltis triangulum triangulum*) and other small blotched species. However, mottling on juvenile racers tends to be more irregular, with the patterning fading towards the tail. As adults, Racers are uniformly colored, ranging from tan, light to dark brown, gray, bluish-gray, to turquoise. The belly tends to be pale cream to yellowish, sometimes with reddish-brown flecking.

Scales: Smooth

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:** Coluber

**Species:** *Coluber constrictor*\*

\*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

**Similar/Confusing Species:** Other species of juvenile blotched snakes, such as milk snakes (*Lampropeltis triangulum*), northern/common water snakes (*Nerodia sipedon*), eastern fox snakes (*Pantherthophis vulpinus*), bullsnakes (*Pituophis catenifer sayi*), eastern hognose snakes (*Heterodon platirhinos*), and midland/gray ratsnakes (*Pantherthophis spiloides*) have uniform or non-tapering dorsal blotches or patterning, and semi-keeled scales and/or undivided anal plates (depending on the species). Smooth green snakes (*Opheodrys vernalis*) lack any dorsal blotches or patterning of a comparatively sized racer.

**Etymology:** Coluber- Snake. constrictor-constrictus (drawn together). foxii (patronym for Charles Fox (1815-1854) flaviventris-flavi (yellow); ventris (belly).

**Subspecies:** Blue Racer (*Coluber c. foxii*) and Eastern Yellow bellied Racer (*Coluber c. flaviventris*). The Southern Black Racer (*Coluber c. priapus*) was mentioned by Vogt 1981 and earlier literature, but this record was a misidentification of one of the first two (with the latter only occurring as far north as extreme southern Indiana and Illinois).

**Range & Habitat:** In Wisconsin, racers are found primarily in the southwestern and extreme western quarters along the Mississippi and Wisconsin riverways. They favor open, sandy or rocky habitats including sand prairies, old fields, oak savannah, pine barrens, and dry bluff prairies. Racers can also be found in or near more wooded bluffs and valleys, river bottom forests, river backwaters, and other

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wetland margins, although less commonly than drier, upland environments in the driftless region.

**Habits & Natural History:** Racers are active, sight oriented snakes, feeding on rodents and other small mammals, small birds, lizards, frogs, insects and other invertebrates, and even smaller snakes. They undergo a drastic ontogenetic color and pattern change from the spotted or blotched juveniles to uniformly colored adults. Racers are among North America's fastest snakes, reaching up to 8 mph when startled or pursuing prey. Although their Latin name contains "constrictor", racers are not constrictors, and instead simply overpower their prey with their jaws and bodies. Like many of Wisconsin's snakes, racers may rapidly vibrate their tails in debris, causing them to be mistaken for a venomous snake. Racers are non-venomous and harmless to humans. Racers are oviparous, or egg laying.

**Phenology:** Racers 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 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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