



Common Water Snake (*Nerodia sipedon*)

Nuh-roe-dee-uh sip-eh-don



Adults (top), Juvenile (bottom)

Harmless/Nonvenomous

Description: 24 to 48 inches. The Northern water snake is a medium sized to large, heavy bodied snake ranging in color from gray, tan, or light to dark brown with darker brown, reddish-brown to black cross bands on the front third of the body, grading into 3 rows of dark alternating blotches. Older individuals may often be black or very dark colored. The belly is usually cream colored with grayish to reddish-orange speckling and crescent shaped flecks.

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: Natricinae

Genus: *Nerodia*

Species: *Nerodia sipedon**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Similar/Confusing Species: Queen snakes (*Regina septemvittata*) have dorsal, lateral, and ventral longitudinal stripes and paler labial scales. Eastern fox snakes (*Panthertophis vulpinus*) have uniform blotching throughout the body, and a dirty yellowish and black checkered ventral surface. Milk snakes (*Lampropeltis triangulum*) have smooth scales, and undivided anal plates.

Etymology: Nerodia- Neros (flowing or liquid) or Nereis (a Greek sea nymph). sipedon-sepedon (rottenness, decay, a serpent whose bite causes mortification).

Subspecies: Northern Water snake (*Nerodia sipedon sipedon*).

Range & Habitat: Northern water snakes range statewide in Wisconsin, but seem to be less common in northern Wisconsin. They often are seen in and near permanent to semi-permanent bodies of water with ample rocks, logs, and overhanging shoreline vegetation for basking including lakes, ponds, rivers, streams, marshes, and river backwaters.

Habits & Natural History: Northern water snakes are among the more commonly encountered larger snake species in Wisconsin, but unfortunately are often mistaken for a water moccasin, and are

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persecuted. Cottonmouths, or water moccasins *do not* occur anywhere in or near Wisconsin. They are often defensive if captured or cornered, and may bite, and expel noxious smelling musk, but are non-venomous and pose no threat if left alone. These snakes often feed on small fish, frogs, and aquatic invertebrates. Northern water snakes are viviparous, or live bearing.

Phenology: Northern water snakes 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 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

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