

endangered

Buzz in the Prairie



The Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake is the one of the most endangered snakes in Pennsylvania. It once lived in 19 different localities in the historically glaciated areas of Western Pennsylvania. Recent investigations by the Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program showed that it now may only exist at 4 of those locations in Butler, Mercer, and Venango Counties. In Pennsylvania, the status of the massasauga is endangered. Habitat destruction from damming, road building, surface mining, and urbanization along with woody vegetation succession of open habitat are the leading causes for the massasauga's disappearance in Pennsylvania.

Characteristics:
The massasauga is the smallest of Pennsylvania's venomous snakes. Most individuals are 20 to 30 inches in length. It has stout body with a mid-dorsal pattern of large dark brown to black blotches, and two rows of lateral blotches upon a gray background color. The massasauga's tail has approximately 3 to 6 dark brown or black rings and tipped with a small rattle. The top of its head is covered with nine large scales (plates) and the eyes have vertical, elliptical (cat's eye) pupils. The belly is black and can be mottled with white. The young are approximately nine inches long when born and have a yellow tipped tail with a "button" rather than a fully-developed functioning rattle. Although massasaugas are venomous, they have very mild-mannered temperament. Most massasaugas will rely on their camouflage and remain quiet and still when approached. They rarely rattle or strike unless handled.

Habits and Habitat:
Massasaugas utilize low-lying poorly drained open habitats in the spring, fall, and winter. Crayfish burrows and other fissures are utilized to gain access to ground water that remains unfrozen throughout the winter for hibernation (October through April). After the spring emergence in April, they begin feeding on small rodents and sunning in the lowland areas for a period of about a month. In late spring and summer, they move to more upland, drier, old fields, prairies, or meadows nearby. During this time, males and non-gravid females will spend the summer foraging and breeding takes place in August and September. Gravid Females will choose sparsely vegetated dry areas to bask until they give birth to their young in August or early September. Females reach breeding age at two years and give birth to an average of six or seven young every other year. The average seasonal home range for the massasauga in western Pennsylvania is 1.5 hectares.

Confusing Species:
The massasauga may be confused with juvenile black rat and juvenile northern black racers. Milk snakes and northern water snakes also may have similar patterns. All of the species aforementioned will lack a rattle or rattle "button" as well as the "cat's eye" pupil of the eastern massasauga. The massasauga may also be confused with the Timber Rattlesnake which is a much larger species that can be found in mountainous areas in Pennsylvania. Due to its listing as a state endangered species, catching, taking, killing, or possessing a massasauga is prohibited under the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Code.

Reports:
If you find a snake that you believe to be an Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake please photograph the animal, document the date, time, and location, and send in your report.

Landowners:
If you are a landowner that has a population of Massasaugas living on your property in Pennsylvania and are interested in habitat management or conservation please contact the Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program.

Identification Help:
To find more information on how to identify a Massasauga, including photographs and more characteristics, please visit: <http://PAHERPS.com>