

Wild Ohio

M A G A Z I N E

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REVILED & REVERED

BLACK BEARS | ASIAN CARP | SCENIC RIVERS

Wild Ohio

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EDITORIAL

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VISUAL

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PHOTOGRAPHER
Sarah Oberlin
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SECTION LIAISONS

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LAW ENFORCEMENT
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OHIO DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

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James Zehringer
DIRECTOR, ODNR
Scott Zody
CHIEF, DIVISION OF WILDLIFE



CONTACT US
wildohiomagazine
@dnr.state.oh.us

FOR GENERAL INFORMATION
1-800-WILDLIFE
(945-3543)

FOR LAKE ERIE FISHING REPORT
1-888-HOOKFISH
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TO REPORT POACHING
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ROUGH GREENSNAKE
COY ST. CLAIR



ON THE COVER: SMOOTH GREENSNAKE

photo by JIM MCCORMAC

Jim McCormac is an avian education specialist with the ODNR Division of Wildlife. He photographed the smooth green snake at the Daughmer Savannah State Nature Preserve in Crawford County. To see more of Jim's work, visit jimccormac.blogspot.com.

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TURKEY VULTURE
GARY C. TOGNONI

REVILED AND REVERED

SNAKES



by **Jim McCormac**
Avian Education Specialist,
ODNR Division of Wildlife
and **Doug Wynn**
Herpetologist

Few animals are as polarizing as the snake. Ever since humans evolved the ability to record thoughts, snakes have figured prominently into written record. Nearly every culture has its store of snake lore and mythology. The earliest recorded cultural descriptions date to ancient Egypt, beginning about 3,000 B.C. Egyptian lore is rife with snake mythology, such as the serpent goddess Wadjet, who was said to be the ultimate protector of the country and its pharaohs and deities. Ancient Egyptians did not uniformly revere snakes, though. Apep was a serpent deity that represented chaos and was believed to personify evil. Centuries later, the Bible's book of Genesis offers a creationist account of the world's formation. It prominently features a serpent in the Garden of Eden, which is said to have lured Eve to taste the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. The animal thus incurred God's wrath.

Many other cultures view snakes in a much more positive light. Various Native American groups hold snakes in high regard, such as the Hopis of the southwest U.S. To the Hopi, snakes are fertility symbols, and Hopi snake dances encourage the spirits to send rain for crops. The Fort Ancient culture is believed to have built one of the most spectacular serpent effigies ever, the famous Serpent Mound in Adams County, Ohio. This 1,348-foot earthen snake is thought to depict a timber rattlesnake or an eastern hog-nosed snake. Its purpose is unclear, but Serpent Mound is an amazing tribute which has survived for more than two millennia.

During the American Revolution, Christopher Gadsden designed the iconic Gadsden Flag to represent America's fighting spirit. It features a coiled rattlesnake ready to strike, with the motto "Don't Tread on Me" inscribed below the snake. American statesman Benjamin Franklin, a contemporary of Gadsden's, created the first political cartoon published in a newspaper. Printed in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1754, it featured a snake sliced into eight pieces, representing the divided American colonies. Accompanying the illustration were the words "Join, or Die." Franklin's famous cartoon then became a rallying cry for American unity. He also made a case for selecting the rattlesnake as the national emblem for the fledgling United States of America (later he would advocate the wild turkey).

Long before people were around to manufacture snake superstitions or use them as totems, the snakes themselves thrived. Snakes probably arose during the epoch seared into popular psyche by the movie series *Jurassic Park*. It's likely that snakes diverged from common ancestors – aquatic or burrowing lizards – about 150 million years ago. If you are an ophidiophobe (snake-fearer), be grateful you weren't around 58 million years ago. That's when the largest snake ever known to crawl on earth existed, the gargantuan

Titanoboa cerrejonensis. It grew to a whopping 43 feet in length. That dwarfs the largest snake known today, the reticulated python of Southeast Asia, which can grow to 25 feet.

Snakes are remarkable creatures that are the current culmination of millions of years of evolution. They are superbly constructed for their various niches. Following the extinction of dinosaurs about 65 million years ago, mammal diversity exploded. It is thought that once the massive reptilian predators were gone, mammals finally had their chance to flourish. The burgeoning diversity of mammals began to provide a new abundance of food for other predators, and snakes diversified in tandem with mammals. Today, about 3,400 snake species occupy all continents except Antarctica; Ohio is home to 25 species.

Most snakes are out of sight and out of mind, so casual observers seldom encounter them. Even the venerable pioneer explorer and naturalist John James Audubon, who roamed between the Appalachian Mountains and Mississippi River well before European settlement was in full swing, offered little commentary on snakes. His groundbreaking *Birds of America* folio featured stunning renditions of 497 bird species depicted in 435 full-color plates. Even though most of these paintings feature backgrounds replete with plants and often other animals, only four of the plates include snakes. However, the quartet of Audubon paintings that feature serpents are especially striking, and illustrate a snake's dual role as both predator and prey. Three of

the paintings show snakes as predators. The fourth is of a swallow-tailed kite grasping a struggling gartersnake. Kites and other raptors regularly capture snakes, as do many other birds and mammals.

In spite of his wealth of knowledge concerning the natural world, Audubon tended to put snakes into two camps. In journal entries detailing his encounter with two chuck-will's-widows, Audubon notes these birds' seeming dislike for snakes, and his depiction shows the pair scolding "a harmless harlequin snake." Good thing Audubon didn't grab the reptile. His illustration clearly shows a venomous coral snake, locally common in the southern U.S.

As his description and commentary about the kite with snake prey shows, if snakes didn't harm birds, or better yet, fed them, they were OK. He does not mince words when describing his other two paintings featuring
continued on page 10



MOCKINGBIRD, PLATE XXI
JOHN JAMES AUDUBON



EASTERN BLACK KINGSSNAKE
AMWU PHOTOGRAPHY



EASTERN HOG-NOSED SNAKE
GERALD A. DEBOER



LAKE ERIE WATERSNAKE
MICHIEL DE WIT



TIMBER RATTLESNAKE
ERIC ISSELEE



EASTERN MILKSNAKE
GERALD A. DEBOER

ing serpents. In one, he describes a ratsnake attacking a brown thrasher nest as “vile.” One of Audubon’s most dramatic paintings features northern mockingbirds attacking a timber rattlesnake as it attempts to plunder eggs from the nest. The snake, body coiled tightly around the nest tree and jaws agape, is attacked by the defending songbirds. Once again, Audubon refers to the snake as “vile” in his description.

Branding snakes as vile, evil, varmints, pests, or other derogatory terms is unfair and inaccurate. As are all animals, snakes are an important part of the fabric of the endlessly complex ecological web. As reflects Ohio’s pre-European settlement legacy of being 95 percent forested, nearly all of our snakes are animals of wooded habitats. Collectively, they eat great numbers of creatures, from chipmunks and mice to small birds to earth-

worms and beetles. Their roles in the balancing act of ecological equilibrium cannot be overstated. In turn, numerous other predators depend in part upon snakes. Broad-winged hawks, red-shouldered hawks, and barred owls feed heavily on them. Weasels and foxes won’t hesitate to make a meal of a snake. The young of aquatic species such as common watersnakes and queensnakes are eaten by bass and other large fish. Even the shed skins of snakes provide uses for other critters. Great crested flycatchers often adorn the entrance to their cavity nest hole with a snake skin, possibly as a deterrent to potential predators. Other birds sometimes incorporate sheds directly into the fabric of their nests, as do native mice.

All but three species of Ohio snakes are in the family *Colubridae*, which are nonvenomous. The remaining trio is in the family *Viperidae*, and this group garners more than its fair share of attention. However, it’s highly unlikely most Ohioans will ever encounter a northern copperhead, eastern massasauga rattlesnake, or

timber rattlesnake. The latter two species are quite rare (both are listed as state endangered), and the copperhead is a secretive species of perhaps 10 counties in southeastern Ohio. Encounters with nonvenomous snakes are far more likely than meeting up with a rattlesnake or copperhead, and even then it is only a handful of species that provide most of the sightings.

Most of our snakes are furtive, hard to detect, rare, and limited in distribution. Of Ohio’s 25 species, 14 (56 percent) are listed as endangered, threatened, or of special concern by the ODNR Division of Wildlife. Five species generate the majority of snake sightings. Probably most commonly encountered is the eastern gartersnake, which persists in urban settings. It is neatly patterned with pale yellowish stripes running the length of the body, set against a blackish background. Often encountered in proximity to gartersnakes are brownsnakes. These gentle little snakes are less than 1 foot in length, and neat rows of dark spots stitch their upper body. The common watersnake is found around

streams and lakes. These blotchy-patterned grayish snakes are usually spotted as they bask on waterside branches or logs, or while gracefully undulating through the water.

Two snakes that willfully come into close proximity to people’s dwellings, and often cause excitement, are the gray ratsnake (formerly called the eastern ratsnake, or black ratsnake) and eastern milksnake. Both species are supreme mousers and will enter barns and sheds in their quest for rodents. Milksnakes are boldly patterned with prominent red or brown splotches on a gray backdrop. The gray ratsnake is the largest indigenous serpent in the state, with exceptional specimens attaining a length of 8 feet. Older individuals are inky black above and cream-colored on the belly. Although ratsnakes and milksnakes sometimes startle people, they are harmless. But mice and rats best beware.

Snakes are scaly canaries in the coal mine. Their absence means that things are out of balance environmentally, and if the snakes are missing, so too are many other components of our biodiversity. Conversely, if

healthy populations of snakes are found, their habitat is faring well and most of the creatures upon which snakes depend, or depend on the snakes, will also be present. Healthy habitats mean a healthy environment, and that makes for prosperous people.

So whether you love snakes or hate ‘em, remember that these reptiles are a valuable part of the environment, are interwoven into the fabric of human history, and have many noble qualities. Even Benjamin Franklin thought so. 🐍



Order a free copy of the Reptiles of Ohio booklet for detailed information about all of the state’s snakes. To order, call 1-800-WILDLIFE (1-800-945-3543) or email wildinfo@dnr.state.oh.us.

OHIO’S SNAKES

Butler’s gartersnake

Common watersnake

- Northern watersnake
- Lake Erie watersnake (*threatened*)

Common wormsnake

- Eastern wormsnake
- Midwestern wormsnake

Dekay’s brownsnake

- Northern brownsnake
- Midland brownsnake

Eastern black kingsnake (*species of concern*)

Eastern foxsnake (*species of concern*)

Eastern gartersnake

Eastern hog-nosed snake (*species of concern*)

Eastern milksnake

Eastern ribbonsnake

- Common ribbonsnake
- Northern ribbonsnake

Eastern smooth earthsnake (*species of concern*)

Gray ratsnake *

Kirtland’s snake (*threatened*)

Massasauga (*endangered*)

North American black racer

- Northern black racer
- Blue racer

Northern copperhead

Northern red-bellied snake

Northern ring-necked snake

Plain-bellied watersnake * (*endangered*)

Plains gartersnake (*endangered*)

Queensnake (*species of concern*)

Rough greensnake (*species of concern*)

Short-headed gartersnake (*species of concern*)

Smooth greensnake (*endangered*)

Timber rattlesnake (*endangered*)

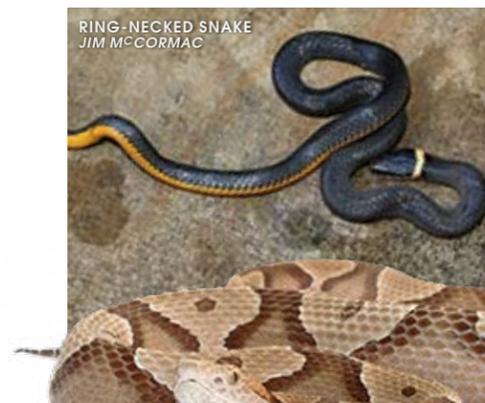
* The gray ratsnake was formerly named the eastern ratsnake, or black ratsnake. The plain-bellied watersnake was formerly named the copper-bellied watersnake. The common names of these species were recently updated to reflect the latest research. Common and scientific names are sometimes changed as new information becomes available.



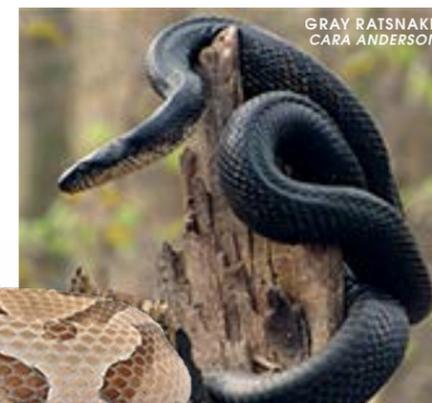
EASTERN GARTERSNAKE
MICHIEL DE WIT



NORTHERN BROWNSNAKE
TIM DANIEL



RING-NECKED SNAKE
JIM MCCORMAC



GRAY RATSNAKE
CARA ANDERSON



NORTHERN COPPERHEAD
AMWU PHOTOGRAPHY

