



Great Plains Ratsnake

Pantherophis emoryi



What do they look like?

This is a harmless relative of the corn snake with wide spots down its back and something like a spear point design on its head. Two brown patches at the neck come forward onto the back of the head and meet (or nearly meet) in a point. In front of that, a dark band goes across the snout, down the face over the eyes and to the back of the jaw. The darker colors may be warm brown to dark brown or olive-brown. The background color is a light grayish-brown. The belly is pale with some dark markings and on the underside of the tail, those dark markings come together to more or less form two dark stripes extending toward the tail tip. Most Great Plains ratsnakes are between two and four feet in length, with a few growing longer.

How do they defend themselves? Can they hurt you?

This snake has no venom and its rows of very small teeth only cause small scratches if someone picks it up and the snake bites. Many – but not all – Great Plains ratsnakes will not bite when picked up. Like many snakes, this species has musk glands at the base of the tail, and a frightened snake may release this bad smelling musk to discourage a predator. Ratsnakes also may nervously rattle their tails when threatened.

Where are they found?

They range from parts of the central U.S. down through Texas and into Mexico. In Texas they are found in the Rolling Plains of west Texas, through the woods and prairies of north central Texas, down through

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central Texas and westward through the Trans-Pecos. The Great Plains ratsnake does well in grasslands, rocky hillsides, and open woodlands.

Their large eyes are well-adapted to seeing during the night, which is when they are most active (especially in the hot summer months).

What do they eat?

These snakes eat rats, mice, and other small rodents. They also take ground-nesting birds and their eggs. Occasionally, at the openings of bat caves, they catch and eat bats. Like other ratsnakes, they wrap around their prey and kill by constriction.

How do they reproduce?

Great Plains ratsnakes lay eggs in the summer in damp, hidden locations. Eggs hatch in a couple of months, with babies roughly a foot long and looking like brightly marked versions of their parents.

What conservation problems do they face?

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List shows this snake under the category of “least concern.” In other words, the available information says that overall, its populations are stable. However, many species of reptiles have declined due to such things as habitat loss, climate change, and other threats such as being run over on highways.



Photo: Meghan Cassidy

A baby Great Plains ratsnake



Sources of information:

iNaturalist. Great Plains Ratsnake.

https://www.inaturalist.org/guide_taxa/840565

IUCN Red List.

<https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/63861/12723067>

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