

SNAKES

in Connecticut



A Guide to Snake Identification



Connecticut Department of
Environmental Protection
Bureau of Natural Resources
Wildlife Division

Introduction

Hundreds of snakes are needlessly killed each year because of mistaken identity, fear, and misunderstanding. Very often when a snake is found near a home, people panic and may even assume that the snake is dangerous or venomous. Few Connecticut residents realize that they are unlikely to encounter a venomous snake around their home. The two venomous snake species found in Connecticut, the timber rattlesnake and the copperhead, do not have widespread distributions. These venomous snakes, along with the other 12 Connecticut snake species, are not aggressive and will only bite if threatened or handled. If left alone, snakes pose no threat to people.

The Wildlife Division has developed this snake identification guide to help educate people about snakes, thereby minimizing unwarranted concern when a snake is encountered. The Division hopes that once people are able to properly identify the snakes that live in and around their homes, they will be more understanding and tolerant of these beneficial animals. The guide also includes information on snake control and who to contact for additional assistance.

Status of Connecticut Snakes

Snake populations in Connecticut have declined because of habitat loss, unnecessary persecution, and road mortality. Illegal collection for the pet trade is another problem, where the removal of even one animal from the wild can be detrimental to an imperiled species like the timber rattlesnake. The following species are protected in Connecticut. Contact the Wildlife Division for additional information.

State Endangered –

Timber Rattlesnake

Species of Special Concern –

Eastern Ribbonsnake

Eastern Hog-nosed Snake

State Regulated –

Eastern Ratsnake

How to Use this Guide

The snakes in this guide are grouped in order of general appearance. Locate a picture that resembles the snake you are trying to identify. Check the map and the habitat description to determine if the species of snake actually occurs in your area. For each species there is a listing of key characteristics that will help you distinguish the snake from similar-appearing species. Each snake description includes whether the species has smooth or keeled scales. Keeled scales have a raised ridge along their center and give the snake's skin a rough appearance when viewed closely. The "confusing species" listing provides a quick reference to snakes that are most often mistaken for one another.

Common Gartersnake

Thamnophis s. sirtalis



P. FUSCO

Size: 16 to 42 inches

LOOK FOR:

- *Three light yellow or white stripes running the length of the body; dark body with white flecks*
- *Yellowish-green or bronze belly; darker along edges*
- *Keeled scales*

Diet: Earthworms, frogs, toads, salamanders, fish

Habitat: Found everywhere from moist areas to forest edges to vacant lots to backyards

Confusing Species: Eastern Ribbonsnake

Distribution:



Eastern Ribbonsnake

Thamnophis s. sauritus



G. HAMMERSON

Size: 20 to 32 inches

LOOK FOR:

- *Three well-defined yellow-orange stripes running the length of a slender, dark brown body*
- *Long, thin tail*
- *Keeled scales*

Diet: Insects, fish, salamanders, frogs, toads

Habitat: Shallow water, grassy or shrubby areas bordering streams, and wooded swamps

Confusing Species: Common Gartersnake

Distribution:



Smooth Greensnake

Opheodrys vernalis



P. FUSCO

Size: 12 to 25 inches

LOOK FOR:

- *Brilliant green color*
- *Thin body*
- *Smooth scales*

Diet: Spiders and insects

Habitat: Old fields, pastures, meadows, edges of wetlands

Confusing Species: None

Distribution:



Eastern Wormsnake

Carphophis a. amoenus



Size: 7 to 14 inches

LOOK FOR:

- *Small size; worm-like in appearance*
- *Glossy brown-gray body with pink belly; stubby tail with pointed tip*
- *Smooth scales*

Diet: Primarily earthworms

Habitat: Well-drained soil, usually near deciduous woodlands; occasionally gardens

Confusing Species: Red-bellied Snake

Distribution:



Dekay's Brownsnake

Storeria d. dekayi



P. FUSCO

Size: 9 to 15 inches

LOOK FOR:

- *Small size; two rows of dark spots along the length of back; tan body*
- *Young snakes have white neck-ring and darker body*
- *Keeled scales*

Diet: Insects, earthworms, small treefrogs

Habitat: Disturbed areas; common in urban locations

Confusing Species: Red-bellied Snake

Distribution:



Red-bellied Snake

Storeria o. occipitamaculata



P. FUSCO

Size: 8 to 11 inches

LOOK FOR:

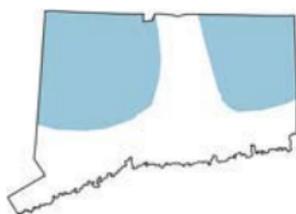
- *Brown or gray body with bright red or orange belly*
- *Small size; light-colored neck spots*
- *Keeled scales*

Diet: Insects, slugs, earthworms

Habitat: Moist woodlands; under debris in open areas

Confusing Species: Dekay's Brownsnake, Ring-necked Snake, Eastern Wormsnake

Distribution:



Ring-necked Snake

Diadophis punctatus edwardsii



P. FUSCO

Size: 9 to 25 inches

LOOK FOR:

- *Dull blue-gray body; yellow neck ring; bright yellow belly, sometimes with black spots*
- *Small size and thin body*
- *Smooth scales*

Diet: Small salamanders, earthworms

Habitat: Diverse; sand barrens to gardens to meadows to forests; occasionally found in basements

Confusing Species: Young Dekay's Brownsnake

Distribution:



Northern Watersnake

Nerodia s. sipedon



G. HAMMERSON



G. HAMMERSON

Size: 25 to 52 inches

LOOK FOR:

- Cream-colored belly is patterned with bright, reddish half-moons
- Body coloration variable; uniformly dark or with alternating bands of brown and gray; banding is more visible in young snakes
- Keeled scales

Diet: Fish, insects, frogs, toads

Habitat: Aquatic and semi-aquatic areas; frequently found along dams and in streams, lakes, and marshes

Confusing Species: Copperhead

Distribution:



Milksnake

Lampropeltis t. triangulum



P. FUSCO

Size: 19 to 40 inches

LOOK FOR:

- *Y- or V-shaped mark on top of head*
- *Whitish-gray body with blotches of red/brown and tan on back; blotches have black borders; black and white checkerboard pattern on belly*
- *Smooth scales*

Diet: Mice, small mammals, snakes, birds

Habitat: Varied, from urban areas to forests. Usually found under cover (logs, stones, boards, etc.) or along stone walls in open fields. Also found around old barns.

Confusing Species: Copperhead, young Eastern Ratsnake, young Eastern Racer, young Northern Watersnake

Distribution:



Copperhead

Agkistrodon contortrix mokasen



J. DICKSON



P. FUSCO

Young copperhead

VENOMOUS SPECIES

Size: 24 to 37 inches

LOOK FOR:

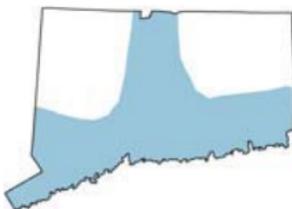
- *Stocky copper-colored body; brown or reddish bands that are wide on sides and narrow on back; belly pink with darker marks*
- *Head appears wider than neck; copper-colored eye; large pits between eyes and nostrils*
- *Young same as adults, but with a yellowish tail tip*
- *Keeled scales*

Diet: Mice and other rodents, insects, small birds, frogs

Habitat: Basalt ridges, talus slopes, rocky hillsides, open woods; edges of swamps and meadows

Confusing Species: Milksnake, Northern Watersnake, Eastern Hog-nosed Snake

Distribution:



Eastern Hog-nosed Snake

Heterodon platirhinos



P. FUSCO

P. FUSCO



Black phase



P. FUSCO

Playing dead

Size: 21 to 32 inches

LOOK FOR:

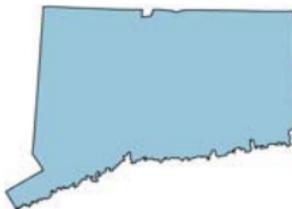
- *Blunt, upturned nose*
- *May hiss, flatten its body, spread its neck hood, and/or roll over on its back and play dead*
- *Stout body; highly variable coloration; alternating light and dark blotches, including combinations of brown, yellow, and reddish-orange. A solid gray-black phase is also found in Connecticut.*
- *Keeled scales*

Diet: Mostly toads; occasionally frogs, salamanders

Habitat: Sandy, gravelly, well-drained soils; also dry areas along second-growth deciduous forests

Confusing Species: Copperhead, Timber Rattlesnake

Distribution:



Timber Rattlesnake

Crotalus horridus



R. FRITSCH

R. FRITSCH



Black phase



R. FRITSCH

Yellow phase

VENOMOUS SPECIES

Size: 36 to 54 inches

LOOK FOR:

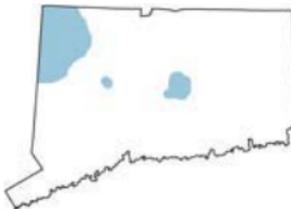
- *Segmented rattle at tip of tail*
- *Large head wider than neck; elliptical pupil; large pits between eyes and nostrils*
- *Large, stocky body; dark V-shaped bands on brown, black, or yellow body; belly light yellow*
- *Keeled scales*

Diet: Mice and other small mammals

Habitat: Forested areas with rocky outcroppings and dry ridges

Confusing Species: Eastern Hog-nosed Snake

Distribution:



Eastern Ratsnake

Elaphe alleghaniensis



P. FUSCO

P. FUSCO



B. BOWKER

Underside of eastern ratsnake

Young eastern ratsnake

Size: 46 to 68 inches

LOOK FOR:

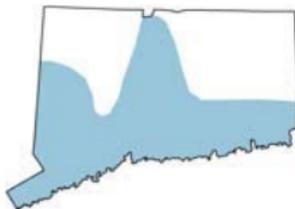
- *Large size; black body; flecks of white often present; white chin; belly with black checkerboard pattern*
- *Young are light gray with brown/black blotches, a large head, and a black, checkerboard belly*
- *Lightly keeled scales along backbone only*

Diet: Rodents and other small mammals, small birds, amphibians, insects

Habitat: Rough, forested terrain with ledges and rock outcrops; small meadows adjacent to woodlands; can be found in trees; may be found around old barns

Confusing Species: Eastern Racer

Distribution:



Eastern Racer

Coluber c. constrictor



G. HAMMERSON



P. FUSCO

Young eastern racer

Size: 33 to 65 inches

LOOK FOR:

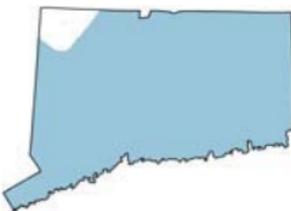
- *Large size; solid black body; bluish belly*
- *Young snakes have a row of dark brown blotches on a light gray-brown body*
- *Smooth scales*

Diet: Small mammals, insects, toads, frogs, small birds

Habitat: Favors open, lightly wooded areas, including fields, meadows, powerline rights-of-way, roadsides

Confusing Species: Eastern Ratsnake

Distribution:



Snake Control

In the Yard

Unlike some other wildlife species, snakes do not cause damage to homes or yards. A snake found in a yard is best left alone. It is likely that the snake has lived there unnoticed for a long time and may never be seen again. With few exceptions, most snakes are secretive and rarely seen, preferring to spend their time hidden under stones, logs, and boards. Homeowners who wish to discourage snakes from living close to their homes should remove hiding places for snakes and their prey: rock piles, wood piles, tall grass, and brush; cracks in concrete walkways, driveways, steps, and patios; and sheds or porches with space under the floor. Spilled bird seed, pet food, household garbage, and similar items attract mice and rats which in turn attract snakes.

An expensive measure for when snakes must be completely excluded from an area is the building of a snake-proof fence. A fence can be constructed using ¼-inch hardware cloth or plastic erosion-control fabric buried 2 inches at the bottom, angled outward 30 to 40 degrees, and standing about 3 feet high. Gates or corners must meet tightly. These fences require continuous maintenance and may not be needed if habitat changes are made. Before installing snake-proof fences, make sure the area is devoid of snakes. Snake repellents are available; however, none have been proven effective.

If you suspect a snake in your yard is venomous, observe it from a safe distance and call the Wildlife Division for advice.

In the Home

Snakes may enter homes through pencil-sized cracks or holes along a foundation, along unsealed wire or pipe conduits, or through basement doors and windows that do not fit securely. These openings should be sealed to keep snakes and other wildlife out of your home.

If you discover a snake in your home, try not to scare it into hiding. If possible, open a nearby door and use a broom to push it outside. An empty pail or wastebasket can be slowly placed over a small or coiled snake. Place something heavy on top of the container to trap the snake. Carefully slide a piece of heavy cardboard under the container and then carry the trapped snake out of the house.

Identification and Removal Assistance

For the name of a snake removal specialist, contact the Wildlife Division's Hartford office: 860-424-3011.

For help identifying a snake or for additional information, contact the Nonharvested Wildlife Program at the Division's Franklin office: 860-642-7239.

Further Reading

Conant, R. and J. T. Collins. 1991. A field guide to reptiles and amphibians of eastern and central North America. 3d ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 450pp.

Klemens, M. W. 1993. Amphibians and reptiles of Connecticut and adjacent regions. Bull. State Geol. Nat. Hist. Surv. of Connecticut. 112:1-318

Peterson, R. C. and R. W. Fritsch. 1986. Connecticut's venomous snakes: The timber rattlesnake and northern copperhead. Bull. State Geol. Nat. Hist. Surv. of Connecticut. 111:1-48

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These requests may be made directly to Marcia Z. Bonitto, ADA Coordinator, via e-mail: Marcia.Bonitto@po.state.ct.us