

Amphibian and Reptile Frequently Asked Questions



#4 – Snakes

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4. Snakes

4.1 Question 1: How can I identify a rattlesnake?

If it is important to first note that there are numerous rattlesnake mimic species in Wisconsin, such as the western foxsnake, gophersnake (bullsnake) milksnake, North American racer, and the gray (black) ratsnake. As a defense mechanism, these snakes mimic rattlesnakes by coiling, striking, and most notably “rattling” their tail. The rattling of one of these non-venomous rattlesnake mimics looks identical to the rattling of a true rattlesnake and usually sounds identical (the rapid movement of the tail on sand, vegetation or hard surfaces can sound identical to the rattling of a true rattlesnake). Another distinguishing characteristic of a rattlesnake mimic is the shape of the tail. The tail of a true rattlesnake is always tipped with an obvious rattle (or a blunt end where some or all of the rattle has broken off), while the tail of non-venomous snakes comes to a sharp point, similar to the end of a sharp pencil. The majority of rattlesnake reports that the DNR receives actually turn out to be rattlesnake mimics.

4.1.1 Geographic Distribution: If you believe you have located a true rattlesnake, rather than one of the common rattlesnake mimics, it is important to first know where rattlesnakes are naturally found in Wisconsin to determine if you are within the range of one of Wisconsin’s two

rattlesnake species. The massasauga rattlesnake is extremely rare and has been nearly extirpated from Wisconsin.



Timber Rattlesnake Range



Massasauga Range

4.1.2 Preferred Habitat: If you are within the range of one of Wisconsin's two rattlesnake species, the next step is to determine if you are in habitat that this species may utilize. The timber rattlesnake is typically found associated with open or wooded bluffsides. It may also be found in agricultural or suburban land along bluff ridges or at the base of bluffs. The massasauga is a wetland species. Usually found associated with river floodplain wetlands or associated with large wetland complexes with open meadow or grassland nearby.

4.1.3 Identification: If you are within the known range and appropriate habitat of one of Wisconsin's two rattlesnake species, the last step is to properly identify the snake. The head is generally lance or arrow-shaped. However, it is important to note that some non-venomous snakes will flatten their heads when threatened, giving them the appearance of being slightly arrow-shaped. The pupils of the eyes of rattlesnakes are elliptical in shape (similar to cats' eyes), not round as they are in non-venomous snakes. Be careful to not get too close in an attempt to see the pupils – this feature can usually be seen from some distance.

- Timber Rattlesnake: The timber rattlesnake's head is mostly patternless and yellow, and its body possesses dark black or brown bands and the tail from the vent to the base of the rattle is always black. Typically these dark bands are over a yellow, tan, light brown or gray background. Adult timber rattlesnakes are relatively large.



- Massasauga: The massasauga possesses large distinct saddle-shaped, or oblong, blotches along its back, with smaller blotches between these along the sides. The blotches are typically dark brown to blackish but occasionally are light chocolate or reddish brown in

color, which are overlaid on a light gray background. The head is heavily patterned, with thick brown bands running from the eye to the back corner of the mouth on each side of the head. Adults are relatively small.



4.2 Question 2: How do I keep snakes out of my yard?

Snakes are attracted to areas that provide lots of cover for them to hide in and the potential for food. To reduce the likelihood of there being snakes in your yard, you must make your property unattractive to them from a cover and food perspective.

- Do not feed birds or other wildlife near your house. As birds eat seed from feeders, much is spilled onto the ground. The feed or seed spilled onto the ground attracts rodents, which is the primary food source of many snake species.
- Remove brushpiles, woodpiles, debris piles (plywood, scrap metal), compost heaps, and old foundations from your property. Snakes and their prey use these as cover and will be attracted to them if they are present on your land.
- Keep vegetation on your property well-manicured (including in flower and vegetable gardens). Overgrown shrubs, bushes, grass, etc., attract snakes and their prey by creating cover for them.
- Produce from vegetable gardens in more rural areas often attract snake prey (i.e., rodents, etc.) that may, in turn, attract snakes. Therefore, plan so that such gardens are well away from your house.
- Perimeter fencing: Most fences (i.e., chain-link fence, hardware cloth, picket fence) will not keep snakes from your property. It is possible that concrete walls may keep snakes from entering your property so long as they are smooth, because snakes are very adept climbers, and do not have vegetation nearby that touches them or has grown over the top of them (i.e., ivy, or tall bushes) that snakes can use to climb over the wall. However, installing a perimeter wall can be costly, require a significant amount of effort, and still may not guarantee snakes will be deterred, making it impractical.

4.3 Question 3: How do I keep snakes out of the foundation/basement of my house?

This can be very difficult to do. Typically snakes occupy the foundations/basements of homes because these locations are being used for winter hibernation. Snakes are usually attracted to home foundations and/or basements if (a) the house is new and built on the site of an existing hibernaculum, (b) the house is old and the foundation has been traditionally used by snakes as a hibernaculum for many years, or (c)

construction nearby has destroyed an existing hibernaculum, forcing snakes to find a new location for winter hibernation.

Placing a snake found in your basement outside during the winter will result in the death of that individual. If you can, leave the snake be until the next spring or contact a wildlife rehabilitator who may be willing to house the snake over the winter. If you let the snake be it will likely just hide somewhere out of sight, most of the time and will likely leave right away in the spring. If you plan on sealing your basement to keep snakes out, this should be done in mid-summer, if possible, so that you are keeping snakes *out*, rather than sealing them *in*. Sealing a basement in mid-summer increases the likelihood that any snakes using this location as a hibernaculum are dispersed into the landscape and not in the basement at that time.

4.4 Question 4: Can I relocate snakes I find on my property?

You can relocate snakes short distances (i.e., off of your property) with no ill effect to the snake. However, transporting them long distances (i.e., to the next county or township) is not beneficial. Snakes are believed to inhabit a known home range, and if moved they will try to find their way back to the same general area. Their home range also includes the location where they overwinter, if they are moved so far that they can no longer find their overwintering location, they will likely die during the winter. For this reason, it is also not a good idea to try and keep a snake found on a camping trip, etc. as a pet for the summer and releasing it in some other location once the summer has ended.

4.5 Question 5: Why do I find snakes in my compost heap?

There are two possible reasons why snakes are attracted to compost and both involve heat production. Because the decay of vegetation in these heaps produces heat, snakes (being cold-blooded) seek this warmth when air temperatures are cool (mostly in spring and fall). In addition, many species of snakes will also lay their eggs in compost heaps, to take advantage of the heat produced, for egg incubation. Egg-laying in most species occurs in mid-summer.

4.6 Question 6: Do snakes spread disease?

No. There are no known diseases spread from wild snakes to humans. In fact, they reduce populations of mammals (such as rodents) which can carry diseases, making them beneficial. However, to be cautious, you should always wash your hands thoroughly after handling a wild snake.

4.7 Question 7: Where do I report snake sightings?

If you have a confirmed rattlesnake sighting, you can report it by calling 1-888-74SNAKE.

If you have a confirmed sighting of a Bullsnake, you can report it to:

<http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/er/herps/snakes/bullsnake2.htm>

Other snake observations, particularly rare species can be reported at:

http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/er/forms/rare_animal_report.asp

NOTE: It is critical that a picture always accompany your report, if possible, for proper identification.

4.8 Local Snake Names and Myths about Snakes in Wisconsin

4.8.1 “Pinesnake”: Often times the term “pinesnake” is generally applied to several of Wisconsin’s larger constricting snake species such as the bullsnake, western foxsnake, and ratsnake. True “pinesnakes” do not exist in the upper Midwest.

4.8.2. “Blower Snake” or “Blowsnake”: In some regions of Wisconsin, the eastern hog-nosed snake is referred to as a “blower snake” or “blowsnake”. This is because the snake flattens its neck and hisses loudly when threatened. This snake is harmless and should not be intentionally harassed.

4.8.3. Are cobras found naturally in Wisconsin? No. But the eastern hog-nosed snake is often mistaken for a cobra. This is because the snake flattens its neck when threatened, making it appear to have a cobra’s hood.



4.8.4 Water Moccasins or Cottonmouths: Water moccasins or cottonmouths do NOT naturally occur in Wisconsin. However, the northern watersnake is frequently mistaken for a moccasin/cottonmouth or massasauga in Wisconsin. The non-venomous northern watersnake is often found in association with water and will flatten its head (giving it the appearance of being arrow-shaped) and/or bite when threatened.



Northern Watersnake (Photos by JM Kapfer)

4.8.5 Do milksnakes really suck milk from dairy cows? No. There is a long-standing myth in North America that milksnakes found in barns are there to suck milk from the udders of dairy cows, causing their milk to go sour, or ceasing milk production. This myth is completely false. In fact, most snakes are attracted to barns because of warmth, or because their primary prey (rodents) are attracted to barns. In general, snakes should be welcomed by farmers as a free means of rodent control.

4.8.6 Is the DNR stocking rattlesnakes to control the turkey population? No. The DNR has never stocked rattlesnakes to control turkey populations. Not only would this method of turkey control be completely ineffective (i.e., rattlesnakes do not eat turkeys), there are other control measures that already exist to help control turkey populations (such as a turkey hunting season).

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