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Western Ratsnake

Spring is right around the corner! When the weather starts to warm up, creatures of all shapes and sizes begin to show themselves, even the scaly slithery reptiles that most humans despise. The non-venomous Western Ratsnake also known as the black rat snake, pilot black snake, rat snake or simply, black snake is widely dispersed in the more timbered eastern half of our state of Kansas. Adult Black Snakes are generally shiny black and some have patterns of dark blotches; those from south-central Kansas may be more distinctly blotched. Their throats, upper chin and neck are white and their belly's are cream to yellow-white, molted with gray or checkered with black (Missouri Department of Conservation). Juveniles look differently than the adults. They have longitudinal dark brown blotches on a light gray background color. Their blotches are square shaped and they often have small projections toward the head and the tail from each corner. They have a dark brown back band that crosses the top of the head in front of the eyes and it extends back through the eyes to the rear upper labials on each side. At around three years of age the Young Western Ratsnakes begin to darken in color, losing the juvenile pattern (Kansas Herpetofaunal Atlas).

Adults normally grow to about 42-72 inches (about 3 feet to 6 feet in length). The largest Western Black snake recorded was in Canada, measuring a total length of 256.5 cm (8 ft. 5 in), making it, officially the longest snake in North America (iNaturalist).

Black Snakes eat a variety of rodents, small rabbits, bats, bird eggs, small birds, and, on occasion, lizards. Prey is killed by constriction. They are excellent climbers and often climb trees to raid bird nests (including bluebird boxes) for eggs and young. Young Western Ratsnakes eat frogs, lizards, and insects (Missouri Department of Conservation).

Western Ratsnakes live in a wide variety of habitats: rocky, wooded hillsides, wooded areas along streams and rivers, and in or near farm buildings, abandon houses and homes. They take shelter in brush piles, hollow trees, farm buildings, and old houses where mice are plenty. They are known to be excellent climbers and often bask in trees. Interesting enough, the Ratsnake is also a proficient swimmer! They overwinter in mammal burrows, old rock quarries, and other places, including rotted stumps or root systems of dead trees (Missouri Department of Conservation). Black Snakes are generally solitary however, at times, during the winter they have been known to hibernate in dens with copperheads and Timber rattlesnakes. This association gave rise to one of its common names, the Pilot Black Snake, and the superstition that this nonvenomous species led the venomous ones to the den. When a black snake becomes startled, they have been known to freeze and wrinkle themselves into a series of kinks. If they feel further threatened, they may flee quickly or perform a tail vibrate (potentially a form of mimicry, which makes them sound like rattlesnakes). They are capable of producing a foul-smelling musk, which they will release onto predators if picked up. They spread the musk with their tails in hopes of deterring the threat. When cornered or provoked, Western rat snakes may stand their ground and become aggressive (Animalia).

Black Snakes become more active from late March to November; become more nocturnal during summer (Kansas Herpetofaunal Atlas). They breed in late May and early June. Five weeks after mating the female lays about 12-20 eggs in a hidden area, under hollow logs or leaves, or in abandoned burrows. The eggs hatch about 65-70 days later in late August to early October (Animalia).

While most people will kill snakes, often out of fear, this snake is harmless. If provoked, the Western Black snake can become aggressive. The black snake is a non-venomous predator and they help keep populations of other animals, especially rodents, controlled. These snakes reduce damage to crops and stored grain by rodents without the use of deadly poisons.

Please contact the Cherokee County Extension office at 620-429-3849 if you have any questions.

Source:

Animalia, <http://animalia.bio/western-rat-snake>

iNaturalist, https://www.inaturalist.org/guide_taxa/776599

Kansas Herpetofaunal Atlas, <https://webapps.fhsu.edu/ksherp/account.aspx?o=33&t=82>

Missouri Department of Conservation, <https://nature.mdc.mo.gov/discover-nature/field-guide/western-ratsnake>