Desert Nightsnake

Endangered: The Desert Nightsnake is considered to be the rarest snake in Canada.

Characteristics:
The Desert Nightsnake is a small and slender-bodied snake that grows to an approximate length of only 30 to 66 cm. It is British Columbia’s only opisthoglyphous (rear-fanged) venomous snake. The venom is not known to be poisonous to humans and they are reluctant to bite when handled. However, no snake in the wild should be handled especially those that are threatened or endangered.

The Desert Nightsnake has a vertical pupil like that of the Western Rattlesnake and the Rubber Boa. This slender blotched snake could be mistaken for a juvenile racer, gopher snake or rattlesnake, but close examination reveals its distinguishing features:

- It has three long, dark blotches along the neck and running behind each eye, a slender tail without a rattle and smooth body scales. It has a beige, yellowish or grey body, patterned with dark grey-brown blotches that are usually in offset pairs down the back. The belly is unpainted cream or white.

Habitat:
The Desert Nightsnake is usually found under rocks or other cover, but may be seen crossing roads at night as it searches for prey. This species occurs in a variety of habitats but is associated with and sandy and rocky habitats. All British Columbia specimens have been found near talus slopes (also known as scree, talus is a sloping mass of rocky fragments and debris formed at the base of a cliff) and under rocks in antelope brush grassland habitat. Other vegetation in the immediate vicinity of record sites includes: saskatoon, bunchgrass, chokecherry, poison ivy and sage. Grasslands and low elevation ponderosa pine are important foraging areas and the rocky outcrops and cliffs provide winter dens.

Behaviour and Breeding:
Since the Desert Nightsnake is secretive and nocturnal, little is known about its behaviour.

Nightsnakes may lay eggs between April and August. They may produce two clutches per year in other parts of their range which would explain the wide range of egg-laying dates. They deposit two to nine eggs. There is no data on reproductive rate, growth rate of individuals, or Desert Nightsnake population trends in British Columbia. Mating has been observed in British Columbia in the spring, shortly after emergence from winter hibernacula.

Diet:
The Night Snake is the only rear-fanged venomous snake in British Columbia. The fangs consist of enlarged teeth at the back of the upper jaw and are only slightly grooved to transmit venomous saliva. The saliva is toxic to the snake’s usual prey and is worked into the prey when grasped, accompanied by a “chewing” motion. This venom appears toxic to amphibians and can paralyze small lizards within seconds, although more time is required for death to occur. Small frogs may simply be swallowed whole and alive. Desert Night Snakes also feed on eggs, juveniles and adults of small lizards and snakes (including young rattlesnakes) and toads, salamanders, centipedes, scorpions and insects.

Distribution:
In Canada, the Night Snake is only found in the Southern Okanagan and Lower Similkameen valleys of British Columbia. This British Columbia subspecies is known as the Desert Nightsnake. As its name implies, this snake is mostly active at night and prefers dry, rocky outcrops. It is difficult to determine the population size because of its secretive and nocturnal nature. Thus, its rarity may stem more from its secretive nature than actual population size. Only fifty specimens have been positively identified in British Columbia since the species was first discovered in 1980.

In the United States, Desert Night Snakes are restricted to the Great Basin desert of central Washington, eastern Oregon, southeastern Idaho, Nevada and northern California. In the northwest, it is confined to the Columbia Basin.

What you can do:
- Attempts should be made to protect den sites, and natural habitats within one kilometer of dens, to ensure the continued survival of these shy and vulnerable creatures.
- Maintain habitat such as grasslands and ponderosa pine forests.
- Retain ground debris.
- Avoid disturbing rocky slopes.
- Conduct survey to locate den sites before surface disturbances occur in their habitat.
- Avoid road construction near talus slopes and around known snake dispersal routes.
- Maintain good range condition in grasslands for cover and habitat for prey species.

Got Snakes?
Attention Vineyard & Orchard Managers and Crews...
You are invited to attend a free Snake Smart Training & Management Workshop.
In this session, snake biologist Mike Sarell will teach the identification, biology and habits of the Great Basin Gophersnake and the Western Pacific Rattlesnake. Hazard assessment and snake relocation guidelines will be addressed so that workers and snakes can be protected in the field.
Information kits and posters will be distributed. Material is available in English, French, Spanish and Punjabi.

Training & Management Workshop.
Great Basin Gophersnake, left, and the Western Pacific Rattlesnake.
Sept. 9, 2009, 9:00 - 11:00 am Tinhorn Creek Vineyard, Road 7, Oliver
Please RSVP to Jacquie Likins at (250) 492-4422 or outreach@osca.org
Other workshops will be available in Naramata and Summerland.
Contact Jacquie for further information.

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