

WILDLIFE DIVERSITY NOTEBOOK: Eastern Ribbon Snake



Suzanne L. Collins

Scientific Name: *Thamnophis s. sauritus*

Status: Throughout the Eastern United States it is considered very common and secure, though it may be a concern in parts of its range.

WV Status: Very few sightings of the Eastern ribbon snake are reported every year in West Virginia and they are listed as very rare and imperiled.

Description: Eastern ribbon snakes are slender snakes that reach a length of 17-26 inches. They have three yellow longitudinal stripes which run down a dark colored body. The tail is long, at least six inches, making up one-third to two-thirds of the entire body length, and the belly is a yellow or greenish color. Ribbon snakes have keeled scales, ridges that run along the length of each scale; this makes the snake skin appear rough. Many individuals have a small white spot in front of the eye.

This species is very similar to garter snakes; however, garter snakes are fatter than the slim ribbon snake and have short tails, no more than five inches. Garter snakes typically also have three stripes but some do not have any stripes.

Diet: Their diet consists of am-

phibians, particularly frogs. Spring peepers and tree frogs are a favorite of this snake, but an occasional bullfrog or green frog is also eaten. Areas with abundant frog populations are good places to spot this secretive snake.

Habitat: Ribbon snakes emerge from hibernation as early as mid-February if the weather is warm enough. During the warm months they can be found in a variety of areas such as wetlands, swamps, ponds, lakes, bogs, and can even be found in woodland areas basking in trees or moving along the ground. They are also seen along margins of water or even in the vegetation surrounding aquatic habitats. If encountered, ribbon snakes tend to flee to water, swimming on the surface and rarely diving underwater.

Eastern ribbon snakes like to spend time in trees and shrubs. Their

beautiful markings help to camouflage them, making them hard to see, but a sharp eye might catch a peek of one basking on a tree branch or lying on a shrub.

Life History: Approximately 10-12 young, which are six to nine inches long, are born each year.

Range: The total range of the Eastern Ribbon Snake is from Maine down to Georgia and west to Mississippi and Indiana. There are large areas in West Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Alabama, North Carolina, and Virginia where this snake is absent.

Threats And Prospects: The main threat to the Eastern Ribbon Snake is habitat destruction. These snakes require the aquatic wetlands for their survival, without these they will not be able to hunt, find a mate, or hide from predators.

--Noah McCoard

Help Wanted!

The Eastern ribbon snake is not commonly found in West Virginia and few sightings are reported. Noah McCoard, a graduate student at Marshall University, needs help in defining the distribution of this species in West Virginia as part of a master's degree research project. Information gathered in this study will be used for the conservation of this species. If you think you have seen an Eastern ribbon snake, please contact McCoard via e-mail at mccoard@marshall.edu. Any information, specifically locations and dates of sightings would be greatly appreciated. *Make sure you haven't found a garter snake by familiarizing yourself with the differences found under "Description" at left.*