

GRAY RATSLAKE

Species at Risk

In Canada, the Gray Ratsnake (*Elaphe spiloides*) is found in two separate locations in Ontario. One population is found near Kingston, Ontario along the Frontenac Axis, this population is threatened. The other population is located along the Lake Erie shoreline. This population of Gray Ratsnake is declining and endangered.

The Gray Ratsnake is the largest, non-venomous snake in Canada, reaching lengths of 2.5 meters (8 feet). Adult snakes have black coloured skin with white, yellow or orange colours between the scales. The underside of the snake is whitish in colour with a grey or brownish design. The throat is white or cream coloured. Juvenile Gray Ratsnakes are multicoloured with a grey-brown and cream molten pattern on a light grey background. Juvenile Ratsnakes are often mistaken for Milk snakes.

The Gray Ratsnake can be found basking and hiding in trees, where it spends most of its time during the active season. The Gray Ratsnake requires multiple types of habitat and the ability to move between these habitats for its survival. Habitat types include mature woodlots and forests, wetlands, hedgerows, rocky outcrops and open fields. During the spring, summer and fall months when the snake is active, it will use dead trees, logs, rocky caves, animal burrows and even old barns as protection from predators. Gray Ratsnakes feed on small mammals such as mice, squirrels, rats, bats, as well as birds. Females will use compost and manure piles or logs and vegetation that are rotting as nesting sites.

Major threats to this species include deliberate killing, destruction of hibernation habitat, habitat fragmentation and road mortality. This snake has an inherent need to move large distances during the active season and must return every fall to the same hibernation site. Southern Ontario has the densest network of roads in Canada- it is no wonder that road mortality is a major threat to this species recovery.

It is illegal to search for, harass or capture a species at risk or destroy their habitat.

Picture courtesy of Rob Tervo

References: COSEWIC 2007. COSEWIC assessment and status report on the Gray Ratsnake *Elaphe obsoleta* in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. Ottawa. vii + 33pp.

