



**Natural Heritage
& Endangered Species
Program**

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

**North American Racer
*Coluber constrictor***

State Status: **None**
Federal Status: **None**

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: The North American Racer is a large, relatively slender snake, highly active and diurnal in its habits. Adults are solid black except for a white or gray chin, throat and jaw. It is our only large black snake with smooth scales. Young are gray and heavily patterned with large brown, black or reddish blotches down the center of the back; smaller blotches along the sides. The juvenile pattern fades to black after about a year of age. Adults range from 92 to 179+ cm (36 to 70+ in.) in total length. Mating activity and what appears to be some form of male dominance hierarchy determination has been observed in the spring immediately following emergence, but mating also occurs in late summer and fall. Females deposit 10 to 15 eggs in June or July that normally hatch in August or early September.

This alert, sight-hunting reptile was once a familiar animal to most state residents. It is noted for displaying curiosity, but it is quick to take alarm and flee rapidly when approached. When cornered or too cold to take flight, it coils and vibrates its tail rapidly.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: This species appears to range throughout most of the state except Nantucket, but has now undoubtedly been extirpated from most populous areas. It is still locally abundant in some areas, particularly in some southeastern portions of the state, but has declined markedly in range and numbers over the past three decades.

HABITAT DESCRIPTION: This species is a generalist in terms of both habitat and prey, but in New England is probably most closely associated with dry, upland forest habitats. The most abundant numbers appear to reside in the scrub oak/pitch pine barrens and bordering habitats of Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard. There are several known "artificial" hibernacula harboring numerous individuals in the central part of the

state, all created when dams, dikes or mining waste resulted in the creation of very large (1+ acre) piles of rock and gravel. It is unclear if inland populations actually require deep crevice/talus slope hibernacula; they certainly do not in the southeastern portion of the state. The species feeds on a great variety of prey including small mammals, birds, eggs, insects, fish, amphibians and snakes.

THREATS: The major threat to this species is undoubtedly the proliferation of roads and ever-increasing traffic. These active animals have large home range areas, they are frequently on the move, and they will use road surfaces as basking sites. All these factors result in ever-increasing road mortality, and many areas that formerly supported abundant populations now appear devoid of the species. Continued fragmentation of the landscape by roads and development is extirpating this species from large areas of its range, theoretically, but in the absence of baseline data, the degree of threat is impossible to determine. It is unknown if the unnaturally high density populations of "human commensals," such as raccoon, skunk and fox, encouraged by development also play a role in North American Racer decline. Research is required to determine more about the abundance, decline, distribution and core habitat requirements of this species.

REFERENCE:

Klemens, M. W. 1993. *Amphibians and Reptiles of Connecticut and Adjacent Regions*. State Geological and Natural History Survey of Connecticut, Bulletin 112. Connecticut Dept. Environmental Protection, Hartford, Connecticut.

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A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

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