



**Natural Heritage
& Endangered Species
Program**

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

**Eastern Ribbonsnake
*Thamnophis sauritus***

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

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: The Eastern Ribbonsnake is a slender, striped snake, similar in color and pattern to the Eastern Gartersnake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*). It has three longitudinal yellow stripes, including one down the center of the back, which stand out boldly on a dark, typically reddish-brown to black background. The flanking yellow stripes are separated from the lighter belly area by distinct dark stripes, a characteristic that distinguishes it from the Gartersnake, and a specimen in hand is readily identifiable by an exceptionally long tail that generally accounts for one-third or more of total body length. The scales are keeled and the belly is a light shade of yellow or green. Adults range from approximately 18 to 36+ inches in length. Mating usually takes place in the spring, and females typically give birth to 10 to 12 young in July or August.

When alarmed or disturbed at the edge of open water (a location they often frequent), Eastern Ribbonsnakes typically flee across the surface to another shoreline location. This behavioral characteristic (not submerging) can be used as an indicator of identity, but cannot be substituted for actual examination of the animal. Ribbonsnakes appear somewhat gregarious in their habits. They are frequently found in pairs and even aggregations of a dozen or more, particularly in the spring.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: This species is not very well documented in Massachusetts, at least in terms of abundance, in part because it so closely resembles the more common and familiar Gartersnake; and in part because there has been no concerted effort to ascertain its precise range or specific habitat requirements in the Commonwealth. Many specimens can be found in preserved collections, however, and it is safe to say the species ranges throughout most of the state with the possible exception of the higher elevations in the mountains, and certain of the smaller offshore islands. It is locally abundant in many areas that offer extensive marsh and shallow pond habitats.

HABITAT DESCRIPTION: This species is most closely associated with wetland habitats; more specifically with open hummock marshes, wet meadows, shrub swamps, and the margins of streams and ponds. The species appears to thrive in wetlands habitats offering an abundance of small amphibians (particularly the Green Frog, *Rana clamitans*), although it also feeds on small fish and insects. Exact habitat parameters are unknown, but there is at least anecdotal evidence that an inverse relationship between local abundance of the Ribbonsnake and the Northern Watersnake (*Nerodia sipedon*) may exist. The food preferences of these two species overlap, but whether competition is a significant factor in abundance or population density of the Ribbonsnake remains unknown.

THREATS: The major threats to this species are pollution, which removes or reduces the abundance or availability of its prey, and loss of wetlands habitats to development. It is unknown if upland habitats adjacent to its wetlands habitats play any significant role in its survival. Continued fragmentation of the landscape by roads and developments may hinder recolonization of adequate habitats where the species has been extirpated. It is unknown if the unnaturally high density populations of "human commensals," such as raccoon, skunk and fox, created by development are also a threat to this species. Research is required to determine more about the abundance, 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.

Updated 2015

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

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

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