

Watchable Wildlife

By John Powers, Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries



ERIC SOEHREN

Eastern Coachwhip

Coluber flagellum flagellum

DESCRIPTION

The Eastern coachwhip is nonvenomous and one of the largest snakes in North America. Adults average 50-72 inches long, but have been recorded up to 102 inches in length.

The head and neck are typically black with the body gradually lightening to a tan-colored tail. Some individuals may be uniformly tan or cream-colored, and a melanistic (all black) phase occurs as well. A coachwhip's belly is the same color as its back, but sometimes has two rows of black dots running lengthwise of the body. Their large eyes have round pupils and are shielded from above by projecting ridges of scale.

DISTRIBUTION

Seven subspecies of coachwhips are recognized, which, as a group, are widely distributed across the southern United States. The Eastern coachwhip occurs statewide in Alabama with the possible exception of a narrow band north of the Tennessee River. While once relatively common, numbers are perceived to be declining.

HABITAT

Coachwhips are most often found in dry, relatively open areas. In Alabama, coachwhips have been most closely associated with upland situations having open grassy woodland interspersed with weedy fields. Scrubby, frequently burned pine habitats in south Alabama seem to support the highest concentrations of coachwhips. Gopher tortoise burrows may be used as shelter in areas where they are available.

These snakes seem to have an exceptional tolerance to heat, remaining active during the hottest portion of the hottest days of the year, even in desert or dune habitats.

DIET

Coachwhips are opportunistic predators, readily feeding on grasshoppers, large insects, lizards, other snakes (including venomous species), birds and small mammals.

They frequently hunt with their heads raised well above the ground. This posture likely makes it easier for them to spot the movements of their

prey. Coachwhips can smell their prey and follow scent trails like many other snakes. Unlike most snakes, however, they seem to locate their prey visually by keying on its movement.

Coachwhips capture prey with their powerful jaws, which have rows of inward-slanting tiny teeth. They do not constrict their prey to kill it, but simply grab it and eat it alive. Coachwhips sometimes beat their prey against the ground or other hard surface to stun it. These snakes feed frequently due to their high activity level.

REPRODUCTION

Mating takes place in the spring with the female laying eggs in June or July. Clutch sizes average 10-16 oblong eggs with granular surfaces. Most clutches are located in rotting vegetation or logs and hatch 6 to 11 weeks after being laid. Hatchlings are typically 12-16 inches long and receive no known parental care. Newly hatched and young coachwhips are lighter colored than adults and have a pattern of dark bands across their backs. This banding pattern fades as it gets closer to the tail, and gradually fades completely with age.

CONSERVATION

Like all snakes, Eastern coachwhips are an important part of the ecosystem. Although snakes cause fear in many people, their benefits include reducing unwanted rodents and garden pests.

The Eastern coachwhip is protected by law and is declared of Moderate Conservation Concern in Alabama due to declining numbers, mainly in north Alabama. 



FACTS ABOUT Eastern Coachwhips

- + The smooth scales and coloration on its long, slim tail has the appearance of a braided whip. It is from this characteristic that the coachwhip gets its common name.
- + This snake is extremely fast (believed to be the fastest in North America) and is a good climber as well.
- + Though aggressive in defense, these snakes will not chase a person down and “whip them to death” as a common legend suggests.

