

# EASTERN INDIGO SNAKE

The Eastern indigo snake (*Drymarchon couperi*) is the largest North American snake with adult lengths exceeding 8 feet. Indigo snakes are a glossy, bluish-black color, which is where the “indigo” portion of its name originates. The chin, throat and sides of the face may be lighter in color, sometimes even reddish. Indigo snakes are harmless and generally calm. However, if threatened, indigo snakes may flatten their necks,

## HABITAT

The Eastern indigo snake is classified as a threatened species, mainly due to loss of habitat. Indigo snakes are typically found in open, dry, sandy regions historically dominated by longleaf pines. These same sites are also often home to the gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*). The burrows of the gopher tortoise serve as winter den sites for indigo snakes and are important to the snake’s life cycle.

Like all reptiles, snakes are “cold blooded” with body temperatures regulated by the external environment. During winter, indigos escape from the cold by retreating inside gopher tortoise burrows. Burrows

may have tortoises present or may be old and abandoned. The burrows and other den sites also provide protection from fire and predators.

As the weather warms in spring and summer, indigo snakes seek the wetter, cooler areas of streambanks and wetlands where food can be found. The indigo’s home range may exceed 1,000 acres.

vibrate their tails and hiss in attempts to frighten away the threat. Indigo snakes rarely bite if handled, but even then, the bite poses little danger since the snake has no venom.

## LIFE NOTES

Breeding occurs in fall through mid-winter. Around nine eggs are laid and hatch three to four months later. Hatchling indigos approach two feet and are most vulnerable at this stage. Adult snakes have few natural predators, but juveniles are food for many animals. Predators include coyotes, bobcats, hawks, other snakes, feral pigs and feral or domestic dogs and cats. Young snakes are also more susceptible to extreme environmental conditions reinforcing the need for suitable dens, burrows and other retreats.



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## Have You Seen An Indigo Snake?

Over 50 species and subspecies of snakes may be found in Alabama. If you think you have encountered an indigo snake, note the snake’s overall appearance, any markings, behavior, habitat, and location where encountered. DO NOT kill or capture the snake.

If possible, photograph the snake and report your sighting to:



Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries  
Wildlife Section

30571 Five Rivers Boulevard  
Spanish Fort, AL 36527  
(251) 626-5474  
dcnr.d5wff@dcnr.alabama.gov  
www.outdooralabama.com



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# EASTERN INDIGO SNAKE

## PAST PRESENT AND FUTURE IN ALABAMA

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## INDIGO'S FUTURE

**B**ecause the Eastern indigo snake is so rare, a reported encounter is likely a case of mistaken identity. However, some possible sightings keep the hope alive that the species has persisted in Alabama.

Efforts continue to introduce indigo snakes back into the wild. Adult indigo snakes from locations in the Southeast were captured for breeding by cooperating agencies. Offspring are raised to approximately one year of age in large outdoor cages that simulate their natural environment. The year in captivity provides the released snakes a better chance of survival. Upon release at suitable sites, the young indigos are permanently marked for follow-up identification. Some snakes are monitored with radio telemetry. Surveys for adults and reproductive evidence (eggs and unmarked juveniles) after release determine the success of the project.

Recovery from threatened species status is a lengthy process for the indigo snake. Fortunately, growing interest in restoring and managing longleaf pine habitats, continued protection through state and federal laws, additional releases and ongoing education about the importance of snakes in the landscape make the future for indigo snakes in Alabama a bit more promising.

## LOCATION WITHIN ALABAMA



Shaded portions represent the historic range of the Eastern indigo snake range in the Southeast and Alabama. Eastern indigos currently inhabit portions of southern Georgia and much of Florida. Few documented records exist for Alabama with records only from Baldwin, Covington, and Mobile counties. By the 1960s, indigo snakes had become extremely rare in the state and encounters with wild snakes ended. ● marks are locations of experimental releases from the 1970s and 1980s.

**Southeastern range of the Eastern Indigo**



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The gopher tortoise and its burrow are important to indigo snakes and many other animals providing protection from predators and extreme environmental conditions.

## WHAT DO INDIGO SNAKES EAT?

- Small mammals ■ Birds ■ Toads and frogs
- Lizards ■ Snakes (venomous and nonvenomous) ■ Other indigo snakes
- Just about any animal that can be grabbed and swallowed!

## CAUSES OF DECLINE

- Habitat loss from human population growth
- Changes in forest types and tree harvest cycles
- Decrease of fire as a forest management tool
- Decline of gopher tortoise populations
- Collecting for the pet trade
- Killing snakes on sight

In 1978 the Eastern indigo snake was placed on the endangered species list throughout its range as a threatened species.

Snakes play an important role in our ecosystem as both predators and prey. Educate yourself about the Eastern indigo and other snakes and learn to appreciate this important part of Alabama's wildlife!

## SPECIES IDENTIFICATION



**EASTERN INDIGO SNAKE**  
(*Drymarchon couperi*)

**Adult Size:** 5-8 feet **Scales:** Smooth  
**Description:** Shiny bluish-black; may be lighter colored along face and chin; markings on body or belly absent.  
**Behavior:** Generally calm, slow moving but vibrates tail and hisses if threatened.



**BLACK RACER**  
(*Coluber constrictor*)

**Adult Size:** 3-5 feet **Scales:** Smooth  
**Description:** Slender; dark gray to black; whitish chin; common.  
**Behavior:** Fast moving; ill tempered; bites if handled.



**EASTERN HOGNOSE SNAKE**  
(*Heterodon platirhinos*)

**Adult Size:** 2-3 feet **Scales:** Keeled  
**Description:** Stocky; Dark (melanistic) individuals mostly black; snout is pointed and upturned; also know as "puff adder," or "spreading adder."  
**Behavior:** Flattens body and neck when threatened, may roll over repeatedly, lay on back and feign death.



**BLACK PINE SNAKE**  
(*Pituophis melanoleucus lodingi*)

**Adult Size:** 4-6 feet **Scales:** Keeled  
**Description:** Thick; dark brown to black; may have traces of lighter markings near tail, belly, or throat.  
**Behavior:** Vibrates tail; hisses loudly if threatened.



A snake with keeled scales has a center ridge running the length of each scale.

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