

# Southern Black Racer

*Coluber constrictor priapus*

The Southern Black Racer is one of the more common subspecies of nonvenomous racer snakes in the southeastern United States.

They are most active during the day and in warm weather increasing the chance of sightings by people. At night and during cool weather, they seek refuge in burrows or under cover such as logs, boards, and heavy leaf litter.

The racer is one of the snakes most likely to be seen by Floridians. It inhabits both rural and urban habitats and is frequently seen in residential areas during the daytime. Like other racers, it is fast moving and can climb and swim well.

Often, Black Racers are found in a 'kink' position in grassy or wooded areas. This position gives the impression that the snake is a fallen branch. This 'kink' technique usually occurs when a Black Racer is sleeping or resting and is used to fend off any predators.

When discovered, the racer will usually flee for shelter, relying on its speed and agility to avoid capture. One of the main defensive mechanisms of the Black Racer is its ability to vibrate its tail in leaf litter and thick grass; the sound that results is very similar to a rattlesnake. Because of this, Black Racers are normally found resting and hunting in heavily grassed areas. However, when cornered, its only defense is to strike. Its bite is harmless, but its needle-sharp teeth can cause bleeding.

Racers hunt by sight and will eat almost any animal that is smaller than they are that they can overpower, including rats, mice, frogs, toads, insects, and lizards. In Florida, frogs, lizards and small snakes make up the majority of the Racer's diet. Black Racers are



known to improve gardens in the suburbs; this is because they remove animals which are detrimental to the garden.

In spite of its specific name *constrictor*, the racer is not a true constrictor; it overpowers its prey by simply grabbing it in its jaws and pressing it against the ground

until it stops struggling.

Adult Racers are solid black with a gray belly and white chin, but juveniles are blotched gray and reddish brown, *below right*. The juvenile pattern of young racers fades to black when the snakes are about 12 inches long. Adult racers are 24–55 inches long and rarely exceed 70 inches.

Both adults and juveniles are thin with large eyes and round pupils. The name racer is appropriate because they are quite fast.

Breeding and egg laying occur between March and August. Up to 23 eggs are laid. Once laid, eggs and young are on their own.

Newly hatched Racers are about 6 inches long and rely on their juvenile camouflage for survival. On average, the survival rate of newly born Black Racers is around forty percent which means

that only around eight babies survive through the first year of their life.

Although primarily terrestrial, they climb well and are occasionally observed sleeping in vegetation at night. They don't climb trees as do Yellow Rat Snakes, but they can often be found in shrubs and low hanging branches. For this reason, birds usually sound alarms whenever a Black Racer is around because they are capable of getting into low nests in bushes

and trees and eating eggs and chicks.

Racers have been known to charge at people in an attempt to frighten them, but will usually retreat if challenged. The Racer does not make a good pet because it never gets over its nervous disposition. They do not tolerate handling even after months in captivity and will typically strike and flail wildly every time they are handled.

Man remains the biggest enemy of Black Racers, and many are killed on highways. Others are killed on purpose out of fear. The white chin causes many people to kill this snake, believing that it is a Water Moccasin which has a white lining inside of its mouth. Racers are nonvenomous.

Natural enemies include birds of prey including the Red-shouldered Hawk and the Broad-winged Hawk. These raptors have keen eyesight and drop down from above to capture Black Racers and other snakes, negating the racer's speed and ground awareness.

