

Yellow Rat Snake

Elaphe obsoleta quadrivittata



Yellow Rat Snakes are long slim snakes with a head only slightly wider than their body and are the most common color morph of rat snakes in Peninsula Florida. They are typically yellowish with four brownish black stripes along the body. The forked tongue is black and the iris is yellow-colored.

They are also known as chicken snakes because they are sometimes found in chicken coops where they seek out eggs and poults.

The average Yellow Rat Snake is between three and a half to six feet long, but some can exceed seven feet in length. Growth in length is rapid preceding sexual maturity and then slows down. Rat snakes have a life span of 20 years and up.

The majority of Yellow Rat Snakes are shy and will hide most of the time. They are quite slow movers and freeze rather than run when they sense danger. When frightened, they often assume a “kinked” posture and may vibrate the tail and expel a malodorous musk.

The musk has a strong, pungent odor and both wild and domestic cats respond to it much as they do to catnip.

Yellow Rat Snakes are very active at night, more so than during the day. If handled carelessly, they may bite but they are non-venomous.

Preferred habitats are pine flatlands, slash pine scrub, coastal hardwood hammocks, oak hammocks, cypress swamps, and deciduous hardwoods. They are also commonly found around citrus groves, pastures, and abandoned buildings.

They are the best tree climbing snake in the state and can often be seen sticking their heads out of holes in trees. Their belly scales are slightly keeled, allowing them to move up rough tree trunks easily and even climb brick walls.

Their range includes coastal regions of North Carolina south along the

coast through South Carolina and into Georgia and Florida.

Adult rat snakes primarily eat mice, rats, other small mammals up to Gray Squirrel size, small birds, and bird eggs. They are a common predator on Wood Duck eggs. Juveniles eat small frogs, lizards, and small rodents.

They are constrictors, so they suffocate their prey like pythons and other boa species. They present no threat to humans unless they feel threatened. If cornered, they will strike and bite where the only danger is possible infection from the wound.

Sexual maturity is determined by size rather than by age, and most begin to reproduce when they reach approximately half of their eventual size.

Late April, May and early June are the breeding months. Five weeks after mating, the female lays a clutch of about 12 to 20 oblong eggs, usually in rotten logs. The eggs hatch in about 65 to 70 days. The young Yellow Rat Snakes are grayish rather than yellow, have blotches rather than stripes and are from 11-17 inches long at birth. Sex is determined by the incubation temperature; warmer temperatures result in males and cooler temperatures favor females.

Yellow Rat Snakes are a very beneficial species, acting as natural exterminators in barns and other agricultural settings by curbing rodent populations. Environmental and habitat degradation are their major threats, but they also fall prey to human persecution, mostly due to people’s lack of knowledge and fear of snakes in general.

FUN FACTS

- Yellow Rat Snakes will climb to heights of 60 feet in trees searching for prey.
- Yellow Rat Snakes also spend time underground prowling through rodent burrows.