Eastern Coachwhip

Coluber flagellum

Upland Snake Species Profile

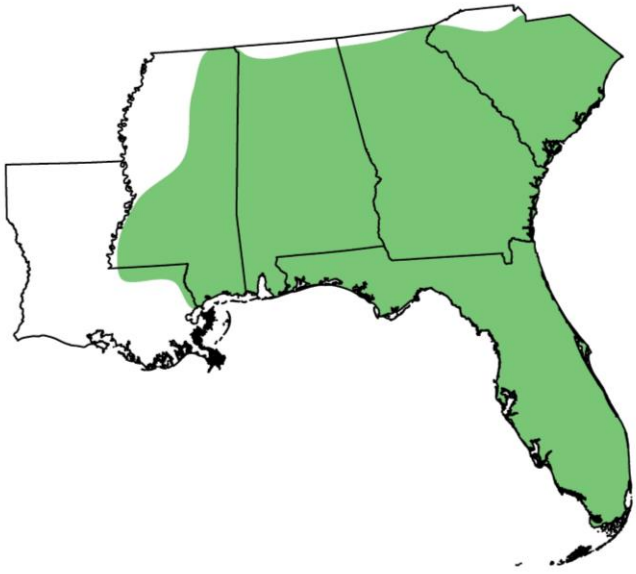


Name Game

The base of the genus, *Coluber*, is Latin for serpent. The specific epithet, *flagellum,* is Latin for whip.

Range and Appearance: Coachwhips are one of the longest snakes in North America. Adults can reach lengths of over 8 feet. Their scientific name aptly describes their tail scalation, which resembles a braided whip. Coachwhips typically have dark heads and brown body coloration that gets lighter towards the tail. However, in some parts of their range, particularly in southern Georgia and northern Florida, coachwhips may be almost entirely blonde in color and lack dark heads. The appearance of hatchlings differ from adults in that they tend to be more darkly patterned and their large reddish eyes almost seem too big for their heads. With the exception of extreme southwestern Mississippi and portions of eastern Louisiana, coachwhips can be found across the gopher tortoise's (*Gopherus polyphemus*) range. Subspecies range southward into northern Mexico and west to California.

Natural History: Coachwhips can be found in most xeric open-canopied habitats in the Southeast, including flatwoods, sandhills, scrub, dunes, and fields. Coachwhips are active diurnal foragers that move across landscapes with their head elevated, or "periscoping", searching for prey. Their preferred prey items are six-lined racerunners (*Cnemidophorus sexlineatus*), but this generalist species will also consume small mammals, snakes, amphibians, birds, and eggs. Coachwhips are very fast moving snakes and when startled they can attain speeds upwards of 6 km/hr (3.7 m/hr). Because of their active behavior, coachwhips rely on large landscapes. Their home range is typically greater than 100 ha (247 ac). Coachwhips are gopher tortoise burrow commensal species and often seek shelter in tortoise burrows, but will also use mammal burrows, stump holes, and woody debris. Breeding takes place in the spring, eggs are laid in the summer, and hatching occurs in the late summer or early fall.



Upland Snake Conservation Initiative

www.gophertortoisecouncil.org

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Conservation Challenges: Coachwhip populations are relatively secure and can be found in a wide range of xeric habitats. Still, these animals face the same threats that affect nearly all southeastern upland snakes; habitat loss and degradation. Habitat fragmentation can make coachwhips more susceptible to road mortality since they require large areas for foraging, finding shelter, and locating mates. Maintaining large tracts of suitable habitat will help conserve this species.



Coachwhips are active foragers and are often seen moving with their heads elevated off of the ground.





Some coachwhips are entirely blonde in color.

Snake Vocabulary
Ecdysis: the process of shedding old skin.

Why Snakes Get Blue Eyes: Sometimes, snakes are encountered with milky-blue, almost ghost-like eyes. This is a normal part of ecdysis, or the shed cycle. As snakes grow, their scales increase in size and the old outer layer of skin is shed by creating a tear around the nose and sliding out of the old skin head-first. Since snakes do not have eyelids, a clear scale covers their eyes. During ecdysis, the eye takes on a blue hue which limits their vison. Consequently, many snakes will find shelter and stay sedentary during this process, which may take several days.

For More Information:

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