Eastern Indigo Snake

Drymarchon couperi

Upland Snake Species Profile



Name Game

The genus, *Drymarchon*, roughly translates to "lord of the forest" or "forest ruler". The species epithet, *couperi,* was named for James Hamilton Couper who collected the type specimen.

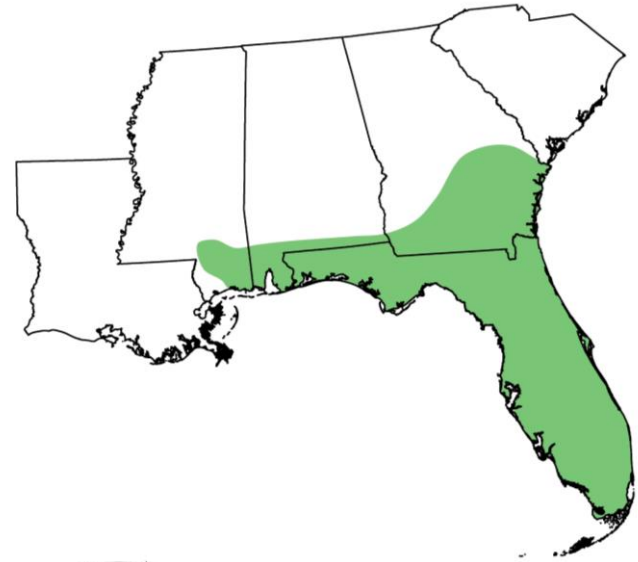
Natural History: Indigo snakes are generalist apex predators that have voracious appetites and can consume nearly any appropriately-sized animal they come across including: small mammals, rabbits, toads, turtles, and even small alligators. They are also ophiophagus, which means that they will eat other snakes, including venomous species, such as eastern diamondback rattlesnakes and copperheads. Eastern indigo snakes may live more than 20 years in the wild. This snake has few natural predators once it reaches an adult size with the exception of alligators, large raptors, bobcats, and coyotes. This species is active during the daytime and some studies have documented large home ranges (>4,000 acres). Seasonal movements vary latitudinally. In summer, northern populations use floodplains as they search for prey. In winter, they travel to dry, upland pine/oak sandhills to shelter in refugia, including stump holes and gopher tortoise burrows. Northern populations may make long-distance movements of over 4 miles between seasons. Indigo snakes in Peninsular Florida do not share this pattern and typically remain in uplands year-round.

Breeding also takes place in winter and large eggs are laid in the late spring and hatch about 3 months later in late summer.

Range and Appearance: The eastern indigo snake is a Federally Threatened species that is endemic to the southeastern Coastal Plain. It is the longest snake species in North America and can reach a length of over 8 feet; hatchling snakes are roughly 2 feet long. Although the base color of the animal is black, their scales are iridescent, giving the snake a deep blue hue. Indigo snakes often have orange-to-reddish nasal, labial, chin, and throat scales, but this characteristic is variable and may be brownish, cream, or black. These snakes were historically found in Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and Florida; however, natural populations are currently only known in the latter two states. Repatriation projects have reintroduced this snake into extirpated sites in Alabama and Florida.

Snake Vocabulary

Repatriation: Returning captive-raised animals to a portion of their historic range where they no longer occur.



Upland Snake Conservation Initiative

www.gophertortoisecouncil.org

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Conservation Challenges: Despite being listed under the Endangered Species Act, the eastern indigo snake still appears to be in decline throughout its range. Many factors contribute to their decline, including the loss of large, intact habitat that snakes need to successfully forage, reproduce, and overwinter. Habitat fragmentation from development may negatively impact eastern indigo snakes due to increased road mortality because snakes often cross roads when travelling long distances. Fire suppression may lead to habitat degradation and the loss of open-canopied pine habitats used by these snakes.

What You Can Do To Help: You can help protect the eastern indigo snake by being a proponent of prescribed fire. Healthy landscapes are important to many reptile and amphibian species, and many are declining due to a lack of suitable habitat. Because of its federally protected status, wild eastern indigo snakes should never be handled. If you see an eastern indigo snake, you can contact your state wildlife agency with its location (many state agencies have smartphone apps that aid in citizen science). GPS coordinates and photographs are very helpful to biologists who monitor species occurrence data.



Eastern indigo snakes require large tracts of native habitat, including pine oak sandhills (pictured above).



Eastern indigo snakes (top photo) are often confused with black racers (bottom photo). Although similar in appearance, black racers only reach ~4 feet in length. Black racers typically have a brown nose and white chin, while eastern indigo snakes typically have a orange chin and red nose.

For More Information:

Gibbons, W. 2017. Snakes of the Eastern United States. University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA.

Stevenson, D. J., R. A. Moulis, and N. A. Hyslop. 2008. Eastern indigo snake. Pp. 339-341, *In* J. Jensen, C. Camp, W. Gibbons, and M. Elliot (Eds.). The Amphibians and Reptiles of Georgia. The University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA.

Orianne Center for Indigo Conservation. www.centralfloridazoo.org/about-the-zoo/ocic

The Orianne Society. www.oriannesociety.org

Created by Bradley O'Hanlon and Jennifer Howze
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