



Blue-listed species

are considered vulnerable because they have characteristics that make them particularly sensitive to human activities or natural events.

Gopher Snake

Pituophis catenifer

At a Glance

The Gopher Snake is British Columbia's largest snake. Although Gopher Snakes have been known to reach lengths of more than 2.7 metres, they usually grow to only

one metre or so. In B.C., they have reached 1.4 metres. They have thick, tan-coloured bodies, marked with rows of dark brown or black blotches along the back and sides. These help them blend into their surroundings. Dark lines run from the angles of the jaw to the eyes and across the head. The Gopher Snake has a narrower head than the rattlesnake and its long thin tail does not end in a rattle! Unlike rattlesnakes, the Gopher Snake is not venomous.

Home Sweet Home

Gopher Snakes are found in a wide variety of habitats, from the swampy Everglades to arid deserts. They prefer regions that have hot summers and are usually found in open areas with little shade. They often lay their eggs in old rodent burrows, which may be first enlarged by the snake. The Gopher Snake often shares its nest site with other snakes, sometimes of different species. This may be because suitable sites are hard to find.

This is the Life

In the Okanagan, Gopher Snakes lay from two to eight eggs, most often four to five. Mating takes place in May. The eggs are laid in late June or early July. Since the adults do not incubate the eggs, they must choose a nest site that will be warm and moist enough to allow them to develop alone. Hatching takes place in late August or early September. By this time, the adult males may have already returned to their dens to hibernate. The young and females stay active until the middle of October. Gopher Snakes are sometimes found sharing hibernating dens, or *hibernacula*, with Western Yellow-bellied Racers, Common Garter Snakes or Western Rattlesnakes. They also frequently hibernate alone. Large piles of loose rock are often used as hibernacula.

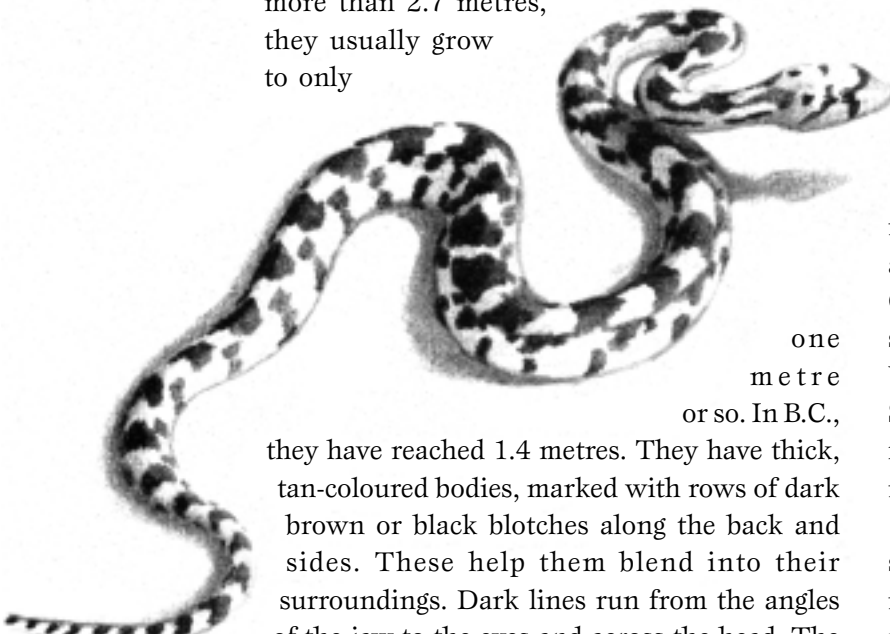
Gopher Snakes are mostly nocturnal. They spend most of the daylight hours underground in vacant rodent burrows and come out after dark to look for food. They can often be found along the sides of roads on warm nights, soaking up the heat still held by the blacktop after the sun goes down.

What's on the Menu?

Gopher Snakes are rodent specialists. They eat all kinds of rodents, from large cottontails to small mice. Larger rodents may be killed by squeezing them. Others are swallowed alive. Sometimes they add birds and eggs to their diet. If necessary, they will climb trees to find them. Gopher Snakes also eat insects and lizards.

Where and When

The Gopher Snake lives in Mexico, most of the United States except the Northeast, and





BRITISH COLUMBIA'S Wildlife at Risk

NO KIDDING!

Although it can only hiss, the Gopher Snake is quite creative with its vocalizations. Its hiss can sound sharp and sudden. It can also turn its hiss into a rattling sound, rather like the warning of a rattlesnake.



One nest found near Osoyoos contained more than 49 Western Yellow-bellied Racers and 13 Gopher Snake hatchlings.



When baby snakes hatch, they have a sharp protrusion on the upper lip called an "egg tooth." They use this to cut their way out of the egg.



When a young snake is born, it still has a large yolk sac contained within its body. Young snakes do not seem to feed in their first year. Instead they rely on the yolk to sustain them through their first hibernation.



The first hibernation is very challenging for the young. Sometimes less than one-third of them survive.



Gopher Snakes eat only once a week or even less often, but they certainly make up for lost time. Each meal weighs as much as 50 percent of the weight of the snake. How would you like a "snack" of 140 or so quarter-pound hamburgers?



■ Present range of the Gopher Snake in British Columbia



southwestern Canada on the praries and in B.C. In this province, it is found in several locations in the Thompson and Okanagan valleys, as well as the Fraser Valley from Lillooet to Lytton, the Similkameen River almost to Princeton, and near Grand Forks. It probably lives further north, too. Since hibernation lasts from mid-October to April (longer for the males), this snake is most likely to be seen in late spring and summer.

How They're Doing

Little is known about Gopher Snakes in British Columbia and we cannot make a good estimate of their numbers. Since B.C. is at the northern extreme of their range, their population density is probably lower here than it is further south. The Gopher Snake's favourite habitat is along valley bottoms, but most of these areas are quickly being developed for human use. People often kill Gopher Snakes because they can behave aggressively and are often mistaken for rattlesnakes. Gopher Snakes have a habit of shaking their tails rapidly back and forth when disturbed. When they do this among dry leaves it can produce a sound like a rattlesnake's threat.

The Gopher Snake is not at risk in North America as a whole. In B.C., however, much of its habitat is being destroyed by development. Because of this

and its unknown population size, this species has been placed on the Blue List as a vulnerable species.

How We're Helping

Snakes in general are not popular with the general public, but they are important for many reasons, including rodent control. Education about their importance will help improve their image and discourage people from killing them. Hibernacula are extremely important to the Gopher Snake. These sites should be identified and protected whenever possible. Draft management guidelines prepared as part of the Identified Wildlife Management Strategy under the Forest Practices Code should help with this.

The Gopher Snake is protected under the British Columbia *Wildlife Act*.

How You Can Help

As an ambassador for all types of snakes you can help convince people to tolerate and even encourage them. You can also report sightings and locations of nests and dens to the Conservation Data Centre in Victoria. This will help the government gather the information they need to help manage this species.

You can find out more about the Wildlife Branch and Conservation Data Centre at:

<http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/wld/>

Conservation Data Centre
Resources Inventory Branch
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