



rat snake

Elaphe obsoleta

Kingdom:	Animalia
Division/Phylum:	Chordata
Class:	Reptilia
Order:	Squamata
Family:	Colubridae

FEATURES

The rat snake averages 42 to 72 inches in length. The scales in the middle rows along the back are weakly keeled (ridged) while the remaining scales are smooth. Two sub-species of this snake are present in Illinois (black rat snake and gray rat snake) which are very similar in habits but are different in appearance. The black rat snake is plain black, sometimes showing traces of a white pattern when the skin is stretched. Its belly has a checkerboard pattern, the throat is white, and the head is wider than the neck. The gray rat snake has a blotched pattern on a gray or pale brown background.

BEHAVIORS

The rat snake may be found in the southern two-thirds of Illinois. This snake lives in rocky hillsides, woodlands, old fields, barnyards and farm land. Active by day except in hot weather, the rat snake climbs readily into trees. It moves slowly and may freeze in place when disturbed. If annoyed, it will raise its head, vibrate the end of its tail and lunge. This snake kills its prey by constriction. In the fall it congregates in places like rock outcrops (where it may hibernate with rattlesnakes and copperheads), mammal burrows, cisterns, wells or rotten tree stumps. Mating may occur in spring,

summer or fall. The six to 30 eggs are deposited in rotten wood, sawdust or in soil under rocks in June or July. Eggs hatch in August or September. The rat snake feeds on birds and small mammals, particularly rodents.

HABITATS

- bottomland forests
- coniferous forest
- southern Illinois lowlands
- upland deciduous forest

ILLINOIS STATUS

- common
- endangered
- threatened
- native
- exotic

ILLINOIS RANGE

Permanent resident: southern 2/3

Summer resident:

Migrant:

Winter resident:

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Illinois Department of Natural Resources. 1999.

Biodiversity of Illinois, Volume 2: Woodland Habitats CD-ROM.