

eastern massasauga *Sistrurus catenatus*

Kingdom: Animalia

Division/Phylum: Chordata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Family: Crotalidae

ILLINOIS STATUS endangered, native

FEATURES

The eastern massasauga averages 18 to 30 inches in length. It has a heat-sensitive pit on each side of the head between the eye and the nostril. Its head is flattened and much wider than the neck. The pupil of each eye is vertically elliptical. A rattle is present at the tip of the tail. Scales are keeled (ridged). A row of dark blotches is present down the back, and there are three rows of dark spots on the sides. The body is gray.

BEHAVIORS

The eastern massasauga may be found in the northern two-thirds of Illinois. It lives in wet prairies, bogs and old fields. This snake is active in the day, except in the hottest summer months when it becomes nocturnal. The eastern massasauga may take shelter in crayfish burrows or other underground cavities. It may be seen basking on grass, near crayfish burrows or in other open locations. If disturbed it may shake its rattle. The rattle is developed as the skin is shed. A button at the tip of the tail is present at birth. Each time the skin is shed a new segment is added to the rattle. The snake may shed its skin from three to five times in a year. Counting segments of the rattle is not a good method of aging a snake as the number of segments added each year varies, and segments may be broken or lost. Mating may occur in spring or fall. Females mature after three to four years and reproduce every other year. The female gives birth to four to 20 young in August or September, the number depending on her size and age. This snake eats mice, small birds, frogs and snakes.

The endangered status of the massasauga is mainly due to habitat loss. Most of the places that it once lived in have been destroyed by the drainage of prairie marshes and for agricultural use. It is currently known from less than 10 Illinois populations.

HABITATS

Aquatic Habitats

peatlands; wet prairies and fens

Woodland Habitats

none

Prairie and Edge Habitats

edge

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