

An Unwelcome Indoor Visitor

By Susan Camp

As I walked past our living room last Saturday afternoon, I noticed Shaddow, our large, long-haired tuxedo cat staring intently at something on the floor next to the carpet. My first thought was, "I don't have any hair ties that long." My second thought was, "Uh-oh," and for good reason. It was a juvenile eastern ratsnake about 14 inches long. It gave one small movement, then lay still. Shaddow had already jumped to our defense and slain the dragon.

I calmly informed Jim, who, armed with a paper towel and a bag, deposited the small creature at the edge of the marsh, where some other resident could enjoy a tasty dinner. Such are the ways of nature.

When I posted my report and a photo of our uninvited guest on Facebook, I quickly received dozens of statements of "I would sell the house," and I understand. Our fear of and repulsion by snakes seems inborn.

We often don't appreciate our native snakes as gardeners' and farmers' helpers. Most of us have some erroneous ideas about snakes as aggressive animals, but most snakes are shy and prefer to be left alone.

The harmless eastern ratsnake (*Pantherophis alleghaniensis*) ranges from the northeastern United States south to Florida and west as far as Texas. It was called the black ratsnake (*Elaphe obsoleta obsoleta*) until 2008, and some resources continue to refer to it by that name. Other common names include chicken snake, black snake, black racer, and pilot snake. The average length of the adult eastern ratsnake is 42 to 72 inches, according to the Virginia Herpetological Society article "Eastern Ratsnake: *Pantherophis alleghaniensis*." The longest recorded eastern ratsnake in Virginia was 79.8 inches long. Its lifespan is unknown.

The eastern ratsnake emerges from its nest sometime between March and May. Males and females mate in late spring to early summer. The female will lay a clutch of 5 to 25 eggs that will hatch between August and September. Eggs are deposited in piles of dead leaves or mulch, hollow logs, or abandoned animal dens. I don't like to think about where the other 4 to 24 baby snakes might be residing.

There is no difference in appearance between adult males and females. The adult eastern ratsnake is shiny black with a cloudy gray underside and white chin and may be confused with the northern racer.

Juvenile coloration includes brown to black blotches and a brown stripe from each eye to the mouth. A juvenile eastern ratsnake may be mistaken for a copperhead, but juvenile copperheads have sulfur-yellow tail tips.

The body of the mature eastern ratsnake is muscular and shaped like a loaf of bread. The adult snake will flee or lie still when approached, but it can change the shape of its head when threatened in order to appear more menacing. It may coil into an S-shaped curve, hiss and attempt to strike, although it produces a negligible amount of venom. It may vibrate its tail in a bush or a pile of dead leaves to mimic a rattlesnake's rattle, a disconcerting sound, to be sure.

Eastern ratsnakes prey on mice, voles, moles, lizards, and other small pests found in gardens, sheds, or barns, and kill by constricting their prey. They are excellent climbers and will raid nests for eggs or baby birds.

Predators of eastern ratsnakes include birds of prey, raccoons, and opossums. Humans pose the greatest threat to ratsnakes and their habitats. According to the Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 420-021 "Managing Human Wildlife Interactions: Snakes," it is illegal to kill any species of snake in Virginia, unless it poses an imminent danger to humans. The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries article "Eastern Ratsnake (*Pantherophis alleghaniensis*)" provides further information about characteristics and habitat.

Shaddow is not liable for his role in the snake's demise, and he remains on guard in the living room, waiting for another dragon to slay. I hope the rest of the baby snakes stay outdoors.

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