

**DOCUMENTATION OF RATSNAKE (*Elaphe obsoleta*)
DENS IN SOUTHEASTERN MINNESOTA**

A REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL
RESOURCES - NATURAL HERITAGE PROGRAM

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Background:

The ratsnake, *Elaphe obsoleta*, attains the northwestern extremity of its range in southeastern Minnesota, and documentation of this species' presence here has been restricted to four specimens collected since its discovery in southern Houston County in 1942. Accordingly, it remains the most elusive of Minnesota's large snakes: no new specimens have been taken since 1982 in spite of at least two herpetological surveys (1984, MHS; 1993, MCBS). This report documents the occurrence of two overwintering populations in Houston County.

Methods:

Site I was searched as a result of information given by a local farmer. Site II was reckoned as the nearest likely habitat from locality data on a specimen tag (Bell Museum no. 1178). All specimens were hand-collected, measured, photographed, and released. Measurements were taken by placing the snake on a soft foam pad and by laying a piece of plate glass over the snake and pressing down firmly, temporarily immobilizing it. A line along the vertebral column could be traced against the glass with a grease pencil and, after removing the snake, the line could then be measured by pressing a piece of string down along its length and held against a tape measure. Large live snakes are notoriously difficult to measure accurately without traumatizing the animal, and I believe this restraining technique causes the least stress.

Site descriptions:

Location
information has
been removed
from this
document to
protect ratsnake
populations.

DATE	SNAKE #	SITE #	TEMP	TIME	SEX	SNOUT-VENT/TOTAL LENGTH (mm)	COMMENT
4/29	1	I	72	1630	M	- -	Snake photographed and released on site, not measured.
4/29	2	I	72	1630	M	- -	"
5/3	3	II	60	1400	M	1168/1380	Basking on bare tree 4 m from den opening.
5/3	4	II	60	1400	M	1263/1520	Basking on rock face 3 m from den opening.
5/5	5	II	73	1515	M	1385/1676	Emerging from den.
5/17	6	I	74	1545	- -	281/342	Stretched out on rock ledge. 1996 hatchling. *
5/18	7	II	68	1600	F	1150/1361	Crawling on forest floor ~60m SW (down slope) of den.
5/22	8	II	71	1340	**	751/899	On rock ledge at den opening.

* Identified as *E. obsoleta* by counting ventral scales (# = 221).

** Subadult, not sexed.

COMMENTS

Condition: All snakes appeared to be in robust health upon emergence from hibernation.

Color: Snakes ranged in color from black to reddish-brown, to a uniform slate-gray.

Behavior: Virtually every snake "froze" when approached, and didn't attempt to escape.

Management recommendations: Bluffland protection, close Hwy ...

Other: We now know *next to* nothing about this species in MN. I have to admit that my "snake sense" was confounded by this one: most folks trying to find snakes in MN don't spend a lot of effort in mature forests; mushroom hunters are more apt to be seeing ratsnakes than are ophidophiles. This may partially explain the paucity of records. More extensive searches should be undertaken before any change in status would be warranted. Needless to say, locality information should be kept strictly confidential, as ratsnakes are widely reputed to make excellent pets.