

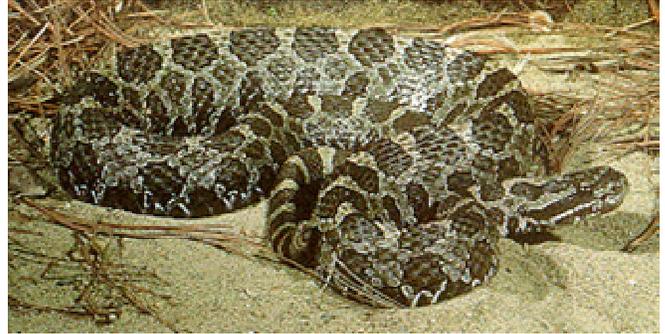
Eastern Massasauga (*Sistrurus catenatus catenatus*)

Pennsylvania Endangered Reptile

State Rank: S1S2 (critically imperiled to imperiled) Global Rank: G3G4 (vulnerable to apparently secure)

Identification

The massasauga is the smallest of venomous snakes. Most individuals are 20 to 30 inches in length (record: 39 1/2 inches). Unlike the larger, black tailed timber rattlesnake, the massasauga's tail is ringed with dark brown or black, and the top of its head is covered with nine large scales (plates) like our nonvenomous snakes. The belly is black, irregularly marked with pale yellow or white. The tail is tipped with yellow in the young and bears a small, but well-developed rattle.

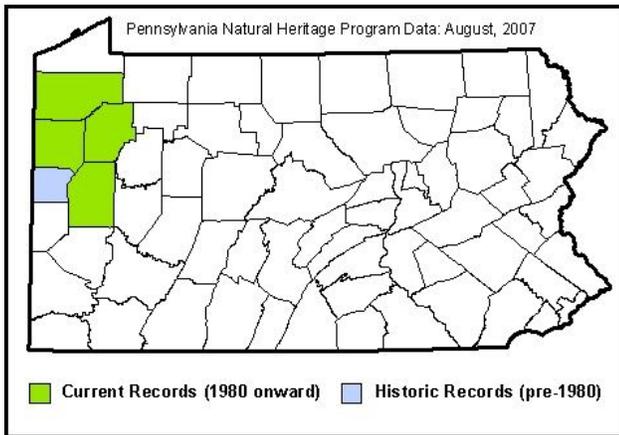


Biology-Natural History

Massasaugas hibernate in water-saturated sites, six to 24 inches underground, although some remain active through the winter, raising their heads above the water in which they may lie. Crayfish burrows may be used to gain access to these winter quarters, from which the snakes emerge in mid-April. After feeding on frogs and crayfish and sunning for about a month, they move to higher, drier old fields or meadows nearby to feed on rodents and insects. Females with developing young may bask together in drier areas until birth of their young in August or early September. Females reach breeding age at two years and give birth to an average of six or seven young every other year. Hibernation begins in mid-October; young may enter hibernation later than adults.

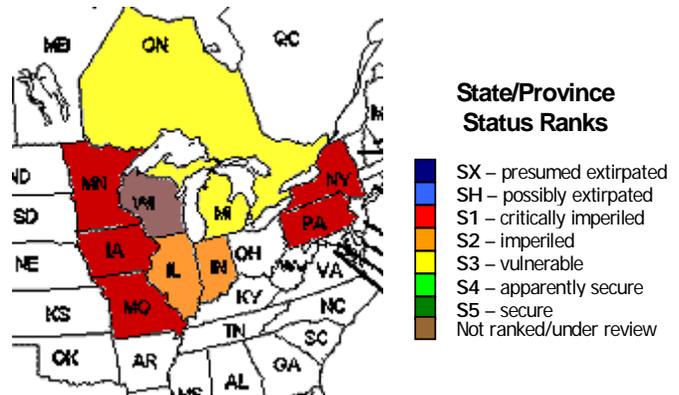
Habitat

Massasaugas require relatively open old field and wet meadow habitat with low lying areas of saturated soil and higher, drier ground nearby. In Pennsylvania, this combination of wet and dry habitat is found only in relict prairie terrain of certain western counties.



North American State/Province Conservation Status

Map by NatureServe (August 2007)



Reason for Being Endangered

Never common in Pennsylvania, massasaugas now may be found in only half their historic sites, due to dam building, highway construction, urbanization, forest succession, surface mining and agricultural activity.

Management Practices

In cooperation with other agencies, the Fish and Boat Commission reviews projects potentially damaging to massasauga habitat. On-site consultation with mining company personnel has resulted in mutually-acceptable modifications of proposed plans, thus taking the massasauga's continued existence into account. Since massasaugas are uncommon, they are valued by collectors, but are fully protected by regulations.

References:

- NatureServe. 2007. NatureServe Explorer: An online encyclopedia of life [web application]. Version 6.2. NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia. Available <http://www.natureserve.org/explorer>. (Accessed: August 20, 2007).



Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program

Fact Sheet adapted from: Felbaum, Mitchell, et al. Endangered and Threatened Species of Pennsylvania. Harrisburg, PA: Wild Resource Conservation Fund, 1995.

