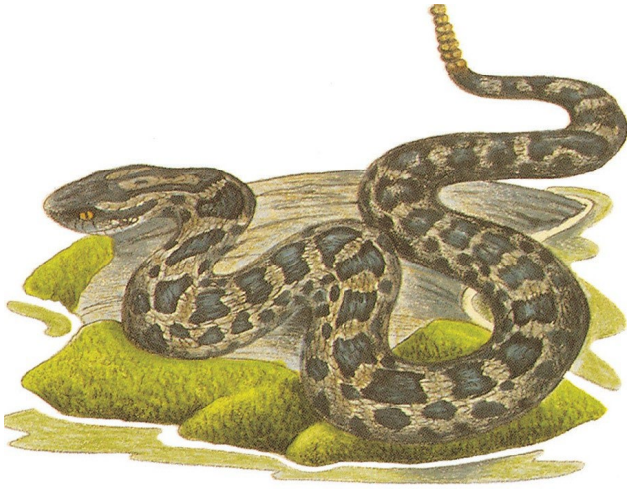


Eastern Massasauga

Sistrurus c. catenatus

PA Status: Endangered Species

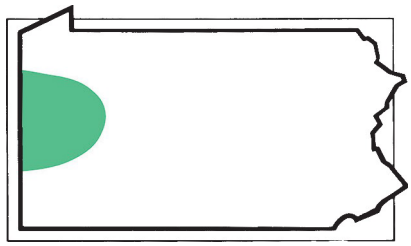
General characteristics. The eastern massasauga is a rattlesnake. It is the smallest of Pennsylvania's three poisonous snakes, but the one with the biggest problem. Reflecting concern for its dwindling numbers, this reptile has been placed on Pennsylvania's List of Endangered Species. It is illegal to possess, kill, sell or offer for sale this or any other animal on the endangered list.

The biggest problem facing this small rattlesnake is loss of habitat. A resident of swampy areas, much of its habitat has been drained or dried up. In some cases, new or widened highways encroached into its wet domain and with each new lane of traffic, acres of vital habitat were lost.

Its common name, *massasauga,* is said to be derived from a Chippewa Indian word meaning *great river mouth.* It alludes to what was typical Chippewa country, which often included swampland surrounding the mouths of rivers.

Identification. Reflecting its preferred habitat, the massasauga rattlesnake sometimes is referred to as the "swamp" rattler. It does not grow much larger than 20 to 30 inches.

The massasauga is brownish gray to almost black on its back and sides with a row of rounded, dark-brown or black blotches running down the middle of the back. Usually three rows of smaller and lighter blotches or spots stretch along each side. A dark bar, bordered with a lighter color, extends from the eye to the rear of the jaw, and several dark bars start at the top of the head and flow onto the neck. The facial pit is in its usual position between the eye and nostril. The belly is black with scattered white or yellowish markings. Nine plates (actually large scales) cover the crown of the head, compared to the timber rattlesnake's numerous small scales. The tail is stocky or stout, ending in a moderately developed rattle. The under- side of the tail has a single row of scales, similar to the other poisonous snakes in Pennsylvania. The anal plate is single; the scales over the back are keeled.



Range. In Pennsylvania, the eastern massasauga is found in portions of only five or six counties in the west-central section of the state. It extends into Ohio and as far as Illinois and Iowa. It runs north- ward to Wisconsin and Michigan.

Habitat. It shows a distinct preference for marshy areas with swampland, flood plains and other wet areas adjacent to drier old-field uplands providing favorite haunts. Even so, there are occasions when the massasauga may stray from these areas and be found in dry woodlands.

Typical of most cold-blooded animals, the massasauga suns itself on mild days, allowing the warming rays of the sun to raise the body temperature to levels beneficial to its functioning. During the hottest part of the summer, the massasauga becomes crepuscular, taking advantage of the cooler twilight hours to roam and feed.

Reproduction. The massasauga breeds primarily during July and August, giving birth to its young between July and early September. A typical litter contains two to nearly 20 youngsters measuring six to nine inches long. At birth, these young rattlers are well-patterned, although a bit paler than the adults. The juveniles have an unmistakable yellowish tail tip.

Food. As might be expected, given its favorite habitat, frogs and other amphibians top the massasauga's menu. Although amphibians may be preferred, lizards, small rodents and small birds are taken from time to time as well. This rattler uses much the same method as that used by the timber rattlesnake in capturing its prey. Venom is injected to immobilize the prey before it is swallowed. The only difference is that the venom produced by the massasauga is not quite as toxic as the venom of its larger cousin.