

The Eastern Milksnake

Lampropeltis triangulum triangulum

General characteristics

In Pennsylvania, at least, the Eastern Milksnake is the subject of more tales and is more often mistakenly identified than any other snake. It is among Pennsylvania's most beneficial snakes, but sadly, is also the most often killed in mistake for a Copperhead. Actually, there is only a superficial resemblance between these two snakes. The head of the Copperhead is an easily recognized coppery color without any marks. The belly of the Copperhead is unmarked and a uniform cream or off-white. The belly of the Eastern Milksnake is white with dark splotches resembling a checkerboard pattern.

Other snakes confused with the Eastern Milksnake include the Northern Water Snake with its keeled scales, compared to the Eastern Milksnake's smooth scales. The Northern Water Snake also has a divided anal plate. The Eastern Milksnake's anal plate is single. The anal plate can tell the juvenile Northern Black Racer and Eastern Ratsnake, which unlike their adult counterparts, are patterned apart. Both have divided anal plates compared to the single plate of the Eastern Milksnake.

The Eastern Milksnake, contrary to popular belief, does not milk cows. Thus, this alleged habit hardly contributed to its name. Rather, the name probably originated from its habit of spending a lot of time around barns, not a bad idea considering its fondness for mice.

The Eastern Milksnake, although considered to be more secretive than many other snakes, still is seen quite often. It appears in numbers throughout its range. Adults attain lengths of 2 to over 4 feet when fully grown.

Identification

The most important identifying characteristic of the Eastern Milksnake is its belly. The belly is white or cream-colored with dark more or less square splotches that create a checkerboard effect. This definitive pattern separates the Eastern Milksnake from the Copperhead, which has a uniformly colored white to grayish belly with sometimes mottled marking or cloudy blotches. The body of the Eastern Milksnake is gray or tan. This color is interrupted with chocolate-brown to reddish-brown blotches or saddles that cross over the back and down each side. These darker saddles are bordered with black. They are widest across the back, nearly rectangular but may become narrower as they continue down the sides. This, too, can be used to distinguish the Eastern Milksnake from the Copperhead, which has dark bands that are at their narrowest across the back, wider at the bottom. Smaller, dark blotches also appear low on the side, near the belly. They fall in place between the bottoms of the larger saddles. A Y-shaped or V-shaped dark mark appears on the nape of the neck, extending onto the head. Smooth scales shield the body, and the anal plate is single.

Range

You are likely to run into the Eastern Milksnake nearly anywhere in Pennsylvania, because it is distributed in all 67 counties. It occurs over much of the Northeast, United States, extending well into Canada and west to Minnesota.



The Copperhead is often mistaken as the Eastern Milksnake. The head of the Copperhead is a coppery color without any marks.

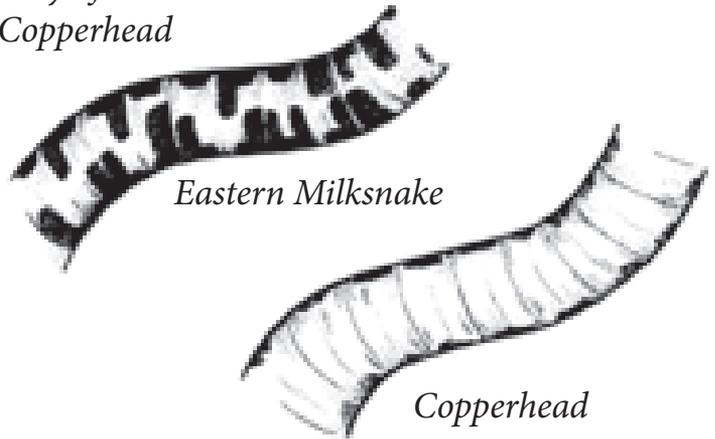
Habitat

The Eastern Milksnake does not prefer any particular type of habitat and is apt to reside in suburban as well as rural areas. Damp bottomland, meadows and farmland harbor the Eastern Milksnake. But pine forests, open deciduous forests and rocky hillsides are also acceptable to the Eastern Milksnake to make a home and forage for food. Rotting logs and damp trash offer convenient places for the Eastern Milksnake to take refuge.

Reproduction

Leaving the den during the spring months, the Eastern Milksnake immediately begins its search for a mate. In June or July, the female deposits from six to 25 or more elliptically shaped eggs, often in a rotted log. The eggs incubate for six to nine weeks, and the juveniles emerge in August or September. Some 5 to 11 inches long, they are more brightly colored, and their patterns are more sharply contrasted than their parents.

Belly of Eastern Milksnake and Copperhead

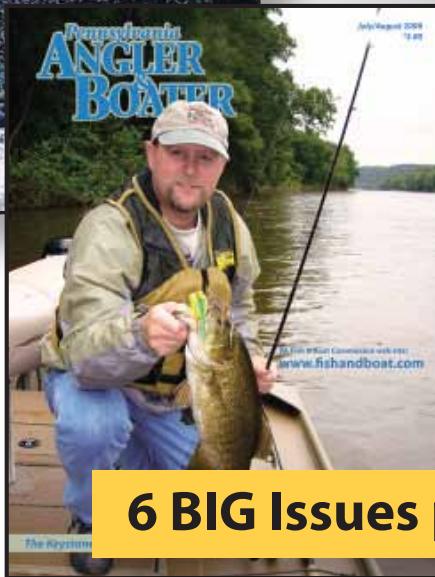
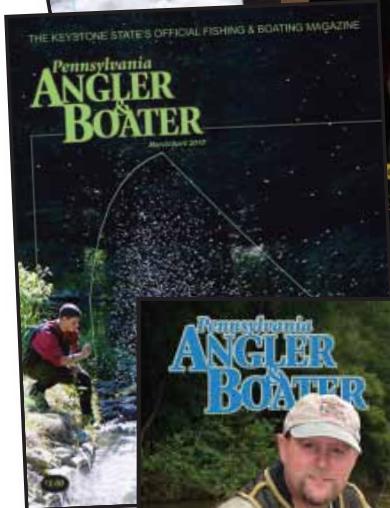
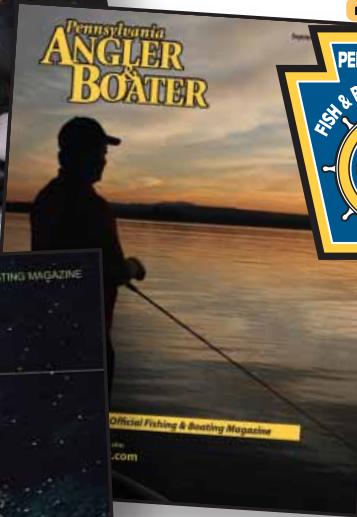
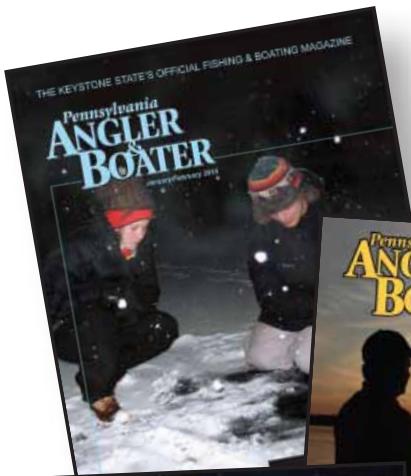


Food

The Eastern Milksnake's favorite preys are small rodents, and mice make up the largest portion of this group. Other snakes, including venomous species, are also taken, and lizards and an occasional bird supplement the diet. ☐



The body of the Eastern Milksnake is gray or tan. This color is interrupted with chocolate-brown to reddish-brown blotches or saddles that cross over the back and down each side.



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