

EMERALD IN THE ROUGH

by Rob Criswell

We've all heard of the proverbial "snake in the grass"—that devious or deceptive person to always be on the lookout for and avoid at all costs. But, such an individual can blend into our environment and be hard to detect. So, too, can the real thing. Imagine the difficulty in seeing and sidestepping a bright green serpent in a sea of summer vegetation. The rough green snake has been provided with just such an adaptation, and sighting one is unlikely, whether you're looking for it or not. And, some folks are looking.

The rough green snake is one of Pennsylvania's rarest reptiles, and Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission biologists and other researchers would like to find more of them. Although there is a 1924 record from Greene County, the only other part of the state where rough green snakes have been confirmed are Chester and Lancaster counties, where they are limited to a few isolated locations. Rough green snakes have a more southern and central United States range, and its scarcity here has resulted in its listing as a Pennsylvania endangered species.

This master of camouflage is often confused with its much more common but declining cousin, the smooth green snake, which occurs in all but the southeast corner of Pennsylvania. Although smaller, the smooth species is otherwise very similar but has a more whitish belly and lacks the keeled scales that are found on the upper surface of the "rough" species' skin.

Adults are typically between 18 to 30 inches long. Pennsylvania's longest rough green snake stretched the tape at 29¼ inches long. Although that may sound like a lot of snake, it really isn't. Rough green snakes are slender (approximately the width of a pencil) and somewhat whiplike, and 35 to 40 percent of their length is devoted to tail.

Its scientific name is certainly accurate for this reptile. The genus, *Ophedryx*, derives from the Greek "ophios" meaning snake and "dryx" meaning tree. The species name, *aestivus*, refers to summer. The rough green snake is well-known as

a tree and shrub dweller and has been given the nickname "vine snake." It prefers branches and limbs 3 to 10 feet above the ground and is most active in daylight hours during our warmest months. At night, the snake will curl around leafy branches within the crown of the tree and rest for the night.

Pennsylvania's "roughies" prefer edge habitats. They have been found near streams and along utility rights-of-way and seem to have a preference for green-briar. Elsewhere, they have been reported to occur in woody vegetation along wetlands, fields and pastures.

Although they are primarily arboreal, rough green snakes often drop from their favorite limbs to move along the ground. These trekkers are most often females searching for nest sites and juveniles, but they aren't long-distance hikers. Nor are they shy about getting wet and readily take to shallow streams and swamps to move to another location or escape a predator.

These beneficial reptiles feed almost exclusively on insects, with caterpillars, crickets and grasshoppers topping the bill of fare as well as an occasional spider or dragonfly thrown in for some variety. In high-quality habitat, these prey items can become quite abundant and may account for the snake's limited movements. In fact, in ideal situations, rough green snakes may reach densities approaching 300 individuals per acre.





There is little information available on the rough green snake's reproductive habits in the northeast. In some areas, mating occurs in spring and fall, but egg-laying usually occurs from June to August. Females leave their usual activity centers to search for suitable nest sites in a tree or on the ground and may utilize cavities little more than ½ inch wide including leaf litter, stumps, logs, soil or even trash piles. The 2 to 14 eggs may incubate for 2 to 3 months before hatching, depending on the moisture content of the nest environment. The grayish-green hatchlings are 7 to 8 inches long. Threats to the rough greens snake's continued existence in the Commonwealth are not well known. Experts believe that the loss of riparian habitat presents the greatest pressure, given the fact that this species is rarely found far from vegetated waterway corridors. Changing agricultural practices, the use of pesticides and uncontrolled development may also impact this serpent and its haunts. Recently, one Pennsylvania rough green snake was killed on a highway and another by a feral cat. They are also popular in the pet trade.

Research is desperately needed to determine the status of rough green snakes, and the environs in which they survive. Fortunately, a few of these locations are protected natural areas where proper management can improve habitat conditions. According to Chris Urban,

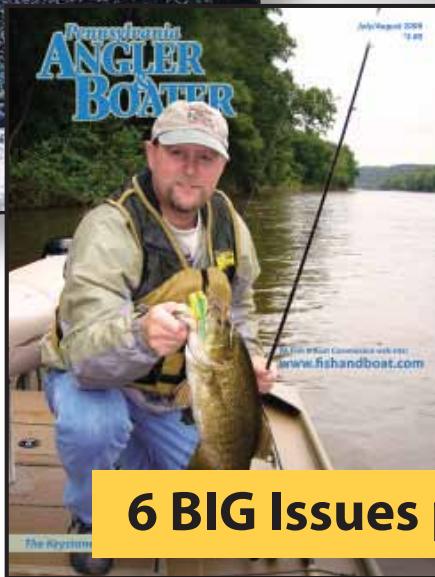
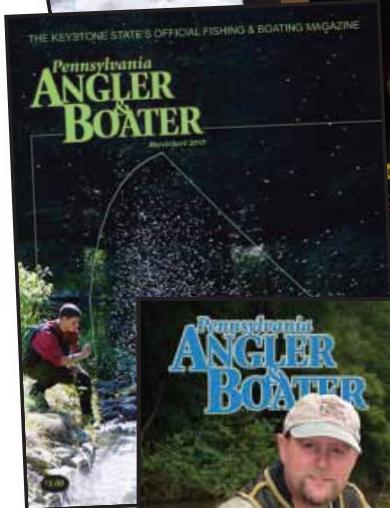
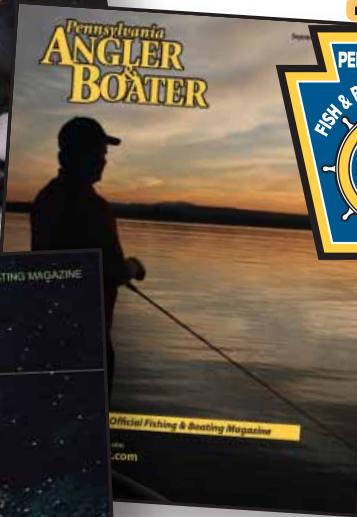
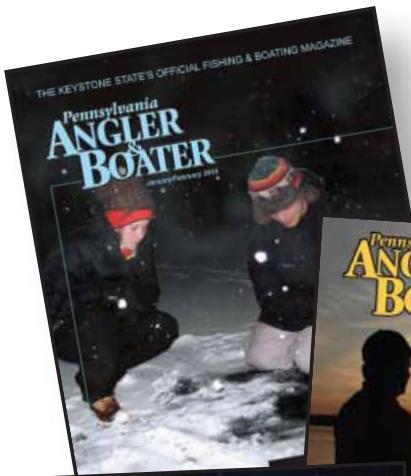
photos-Tom Diez



The rough green snake is one of Pennsylvania's rarest reptiles. Its scarcity has resulted in its listing as a Pennsylvania endangered species.

the Commission's Endangered Species Coordinator, within the near future the Commission will be focusing efforts to assess the status of the rough green snake as part of a State Wildlife Grant that will be atlasing Pennsylvania's herpetofauna.

This harmless, non-venomous, elegant snake is a beneficial animal with a mild disposition that deserves our commitment to its preservation. It is truly an emerald in the rough. □



Pennsylvania ANGLER & BOATER



Get the complete story and read what you've been missing!

Do you like what you're reading? Do you find *Pennsylvania Angler & Boater* online articles a valuable resource? If so, why not become a regular subscriber to *Pennsylvania Angler & Boater* and receive the entire magazine delivered to your doorstep. With each printed issue, we place only a small portion of our feature articles on our website. If you fish or boat in Pennsylvania, you shouldn't miss a single issue, or even a single article! It's been the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission's (PFBC) premier, award-winning magazine since 1931.

Print out this page and mail the form below with your payment to begin your subscription. Or you can subscribe online through

PFBC's Outdoor Shop. **CLICK HERE!**

6 BIG Issues per year!

Subscribe with this form today or online at www.fishandboat.com.

SUBSCRIBE TO *Pennsylvania Angler & Boater*

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Phone _____

E-mail (optional) _____

SAVE UP TO 44% OFF THE COVER PRICE!

Payment must accompany orders. Use your credit card, check or money order made payable to the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission. Return this form with payment to: **PA&B Circulation, Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission, P.O. Box 67000, Harrisburg, PA 17106-7000.** Allow 45 days to receive the first issue.

One year (6 issues) **\$12** Three years (18 issues) **\$30**

TOTAL ENCLOSED

\$ _____

Credit Card Purchase: VISA Mastercard Discover AmerEx

Credit Card # _____ Exp. Date _____

Signature _____

Phone _____ E-mail (optional) _____

Since 1931, Pennsylvania's official fishing and boating magazine.

PAA&B-SUB-9-10