

# WESTERN RATNAKE, OR TEXAS RATNAKE

*Pantherophis obsoletus*



## WHAT DO THEY LOOK LIKE?

This snake grows to an average length of roughly five feet. The record length is reportedly just over seven feet, but people rarely see such snakes. Often people see slender “adolescents” that are between two and three feet in length. Adults have dark blotches on a smudgy yellow background, with some red on the skin between the scales and, within the dark blotches, some scales have white edges. Some have less smudgy yellow and more gray. Others are very dark. Where its side meets the belly it is angular, so that in cross section it would be like a loaf of bread - rounded on the top but square on the bottom. The top of the head is typically slate-gray, the eye is medium-sized and the pupil round, and the lips and chin are white.

Hatchlings are 10 to 16 inches long. The pattern is brighter but the pattern of blotches down the back is the same. The head is patterned, with a dark band just in front of the eyes and scattered dark markings elsewhere.

## HOW DO THEY DEFEND THEMSELVES? CAN THEY HURT YOU?

These snakes have no venom. If you find one, it may sit still and wait for you to move away, or it may try to get away. Only if it is cornered or touched will it try to bite, and at worst it will leave small scratches with its little teeth.



A very young western ratsnake showing juvenile pattern

## WESTERN RAT SNAKE



A western ratsnake in a defensive posture

When grabbed, these snakes often hold their mouths open and watch for an available target, biting with a quick strike and inflicting small punctures. As a result, people sometimes regard them as mean or bad-tempered, but when left alone they are completely harmless to people.

### WHERE ARE THEY FOUND?

In Texas this snake lives in the eastern two-thirds of the state, from below San Antonio westward through much of the Edwards Plateau and, in north Texas, a little west of Vernon and Abilene. Beyond Texas, it lives west of the Mississippi River through part of the Great Plains up to southern Minnesota.

The western ratsnake is found in woodland or in patches of grassland that are typically close to areas

with trees, creeks or ponds. It is an excellent climber and can use trees and green spaces to move through suburban neighborhoods where people are surprised to find a snake of such size living nearby.

### WHAT DO THEY EAT?

They eat small mammals as well as birds and their eggs, but at least one study found many more rats and mice in their stomachs than birds. While climbing trees they may eat birds, but on the ground a bigger western ratsnake is capable of eating domestic fowl, so that when folks call them “chicken snakes,” there is some truth to it.

### HOW DO THEY REPRODUCE?

After spring mating, females lay a clutch of between 5 and 20 eggs (per Werler & Dixon) in late spring or early summer. The eggs are laid in protected spaces that will maintain adequate humidity, such as rotten logs, tree stumps, and places with decaying leaf litter. The eggs hatch in August or September.

### WHAT CONSERVATION PROBLEMS DO THEY FACE?

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List shows it as a species of “Least Concern,” meaning that in most places it seems to be doing pretty well.

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#### Sources of information:

IUCN Red List. Western rat snake. <https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/90069553/90069569>

Werler, J.E. & J.R. Dixon. 2000. Texas Snakes: Identification, Distribution, & Natural History. Austin: University of Texas Press.



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