

# THE FORKED TONGUE

THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE GREATER CINCINNATI HERPETOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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## **The Editor's Den**

We really need articles!

## **Calendar of Events**

February 7, 2007 – Monthly meeting featuring Phil Peak and Will Bird speaking on Snake Conservation in Kentucky.

March 7, 2007 – Monthly meeting featuring Jim Harrison and Kristen Wiley speaking on venom extraction.

## **Python Death in Cincinnati**

I am sure that most of you are aware of the recent death reportedly caused by a python in Cincinnati last month. Of course this is a tragedy for all involved. The news reported that it was a 14 foot ball python. Another reported that it was a Boa Constrictor. The snake was being held at the Hamilton County SPCA. I called and offered any assistance that we could provide. The SPCA asked us to come and evaluate the basic health of the animal and give a positive identification. Dean and I went to the SPCA and were quite surprised to see a rather small Burmese python. Although not on death's door, the snake was certainly underfed. We removed the snake from its cage and measured it. It was 11.5 feet long. We did not get a weight on it but it was only about 4 inches in diameter at its widest point.

What can we learn from this? First of all we need to be very careful when handling any potentially dangerous animal. I must confess that this animal is one that I wouldn't have worried about handling by myself. It just didn't seem to be big enough to overpower an adult man. (I still believe that something else may have been involved. Hopefully we can get the results of the autopsy.) I don't want to underplay the tragedy that the family is going through but this will also have an effect on us. We can be certain that the Ohio

exotic animal legislation that was in the works will be resurrected. This is the second death by python to occur in the tri-state this year. The other involved a reticulated python. Regardless of the actual statistics, it is getting harder and harder to defend a position of "We don't want any herps banned or regulated" The more negative press we get, whether its an escaped monitor or an envenomation, the less chance we have of legislation banning our hobby being passed. It really is up to all of us to practice and promote safe and responsible reptile keeping. Actions of individuals will have profound and lasting effects on many.

## **Labor Anyone?**

We have been approached to provide assistance, basically hard labor, to help with habitat preservation for the Eastern Massasauga in Cedar Bog. Evidently funding for brush removal has run out and ODNR is looking for a few good men and women to roll up their sleeves and clear some habitat of brush that could adversely effect the populations of Eastern Massasauga. This will occur in the early spring and we are working on getting a couple of dates to choose from. We will probably be picking a date at the February Meeting. The likely dates are March 10<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup>. It would be really great to get 5 or 10 people to help this worthwhile effort. What's in it for us? Well, besides the satisfaction you'll gain from helping preserve an endangered species, we may get a guided tour of Cedar Bog later in the year when we can get a glimpse of some of these animals. I have included an article about Ohio Eastern Massasaugas below.

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## Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake

*Sistrurus catenatus catenatus*

from

<http://www.ohiodnr.com/wildlife/resources/wildnotes/pub374.htm>

**Introduction** The Eastern massasauga is one of two rattlesnakes that are native to Ohio. The name "massasauga" comes from the language of the Chippewa tribe of Native Americans. It was probably derived from their name for the Mississauga River in Ontario--a likely habitat for the snake. This snake is also known as the "swamp rattler" or "black snapper."

Eastern massasaugas are becoming increasingly rare in North America and are now endangered throughout much of their range including Ohio. In Ohio, these snakes were found in the scattered prairies of glaciated Ohio. As with many other species, man's disturbance of their habitat, particularly through farming, has led to their reduced numbers in the state. They have been recorded in as many as 22 counties; however, they are a rare sight. The Eastern massasauga is one of three poisonous snakes in Ohio.



### Description

The Eastern massasauga is a medium-sized, dark-colored, pygmy rattlesnake with 29 to 50 dark dorsal blotches on its gray or brownish gray body. There are three rows of smaller dark spots on each side of the body. The snake can be identified by its short (two to three feet), thick gray body. The head of this snake is thick and triangular, with black stripes. Its belly is black and irregularly marked with white or yellowish spots. The pupils of its eyes are elliptical. The triangular head and elliptical eyes are two features used to help

identify a poisonous snake. The most distinguishable feature of this snake is the stubby rattle on the end of its tail. This feature is associated with all species of poisonous snakes, with the exception of the copperhead, which is also native to Ohio. Many species of snakes will vibrate their tail when upset, but the nonpoisonous ones **do not** have rattles.

The rattle is the distinguishing feature of these snakes. In adults it is an organ of loosely attached horny segments that strike against one another to produce a buzzing sound when the tail is vibrated rapidly. In the very young snakes, the rattle is represented by a "button". A new segment is added each time the skin is shed; the segments become increasingly larger until the snake reaches adult size. Two to four new segments are added to the rattle each year.

Males measured snout to vent were found to be 14 to 25 inches long and females 17 to 25 inches. Tails add 1.5 to 3.5 and 1.5 to 2.5 to the male's and female's total body length respectively. Males weighed 1 to 7.5 ounces and females 2.5 to 8.5 ounces.

Nationally, the Eastern massasauga's range extends from western New York and southern Ontario south to eastern Iowa and extreme eastern Missouri. In Ohio, Eastern massasaugas have been described as common in much of the glaciated area of the state. As of 1992, this snake had been reported from 28 counties, nine of which may still have a massasauga population. Massasauga distribution is probably not as broad and uniform as portrayed in range maps. They usually occur in a discrete and localized manner.

### Habitat and Habits

Throughout much of its range in the eastern United States, massasauga rattlesnakes are found in wet prairies, sedge meadows, and early successional fields. Preferred wetland habitats are marshes and fens. They avoid open water and seem to prefer the cover of broad-leaved plants, emergents, and sedges.

Natural succession of woody vegetation is a leading cause of recent habitat deterioration throughout its range. Intensive management to retard woody vegetation growth is necessary to

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maintain suitable habitat conditions. The massasauga is not a forest-dwelling species and forests impede their movements and dispersal. Eastern massasauga rattlesnakes prefer low-lying, poorly drained meadows and adjacent old fields. The habitat of this rattlesnake generally includes a wintering area of low woods, bogs, fens, or marshes and a summering area of drier ground, usually grassy with low shrubs.

Rattlesnakes hibernate singly or in small groups of two or three. Hibernacula (a shelter that is occupied during the winter by a dormant snake) includes mammal and crayfish burrows in low-lying areas, rock crevasses and tree root systems, partially submerged trash, barn floors, and basements.

By over wintering in moist soil, massasaugas are able to avoid lethally cold temperatures and reduce the risk of desiccation (drying out). Before and after hibernation, massasaugas frequent low, poorly drained habitats.

In spring, snakes are found mainly in prairie or grassland uplands. During summer, old fields and deciduous woodland borders are most often occupied. In autumn, snakes reappear on the prairies and grasslands. Snakes move out of the prairie in the spring and return in late summer and fall.

During summer months, the animals migrate up to drier ground where they feed primarily on small mammals and give birth in late July or August before heading back to their wintering spots. In much of the Midwest today, massasaugas inhabit forest-edge and shrubby old field shrubby old field areas. Eastern massasauga rattlesnakes are active from mid-April to late October; here in the Midwest, they are most active from early May through mid-September. Peak activity for this region occurs between June and August. High summer temperatures reduce activity. Snakes do not bask in the open on excessively hot (> 86 degrees F) days with clear skies, but will bask under a partly cloudy sky at temperatures > 90 degrees F. Massasaugas regulate body temperature by moving between basking sites, selecting areas of gravel, sparse grass, tussocks (a rounded knoll or rise of ground in a marsh or bog bound by roots or other vegetation) with hollow

bases, or root-stem systems which afford a filtering effect to direct sunlight. Solid shade sites occupied by snakes include edges of large rocks, shrubs or other woody growth, boards, and scrap metal.

Male massasaugas are known to wander and are much more active than the more sedentary females. Adult males and females display crepuscular (twilight) or nocturnal (nighttime) activity and foraging patterns. Juveniles are active throughout the day if temperatures do not exceed 88 degrees F; otherwise, they too are crepuscular or nocturnal. In spring and autumn, snakes are most active during the warmest part of the day (noon to 4 p.m.). In summer, activity peaks during the period 4 to 8 p.m., when temperatures are lower.

Adult male and female massasauga rattlers have an average home range size of 11,753 square yards; they move approximately 30 feet a day. The average length of a massasauga's home range is .053 miles. The massasauga exhibits a fairly sedentary life style; this snake shows no homing tendency. Small snakes like the massasauga can live 18 years or more in the wild.

### **Reproduction and Care of Young**

Mating takes place in the spring during April or May, following emergence from hibernation. In female snakes that have mature eggs in their oviducts, the molting of the skin releases a pheromone (chemical signal) that they are ready to mate. After mating, the male and female snakes separate and resume their normal activities independently. Snakes are not social creatures during most of their lives. Massasaugas, like most reptiles, are polygamous (have multiple mates). Most massasauga females bear young for the first time when three years old, but some females may not bear their first young until age four. Males also reach sexual maturity between the ages of three and four.

When females are pregnant, they feed very little, if at all, and maintain themselves primarily on fat reserves throughout gestation. Basking and relative inactivity reserve energy stores and may lessen the probability of predation. Females will feed ravenously after they give birth to their broods.

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Massasaugas are ovoviviparous (eggs develop in the body of the parent and hatch within or immediately after being expelled). The female produces large, yolk-filled eggs which are retained within her reproductive tract for a considerable period of development. The developing embryo receives no nourishment from the female, only from the yolk. Eggs of the massasauga hatch inside the female and the young are born "alive." A female snake that retains eggs in her body can bask in the sun, thus raising the temperature of the eggs and speeding their development, resulting in a variable gestation period of two to four months.

When born, massasauga rattlers on average are nine inches long (snout to base of rattle) and weigh 0.3 to 0.6 ounces. After birth, the young are on their own--no maternal care is known in snakes.

As is the case for all cold-blooded vertebrates, the growth of the young is heavily dependent upon the amount of food available. Young garter snakes are very important food items for the massasauga during its first year of life. Small mammals (voles, shrews, and mice) become the major food item as the snakes mature.

Snakes will shed their skin for the first time 10 to 15 days after birth.

### **Management Plans**

Loss and fragmentation of wetlands and associated grassland habitats are problems, few massasaugas exist on sites where original wetland acreage has been severely reduced. Important massasauga habitat exists at three Division of Wildlife areas: Killdeer Plains, Mosquito Creek, and Spring Valley.

To prevent the loss of wetlands and other special habitats required by massasaugas, the Division promotes statewide wetlands protection legislation; acquires wetlands and other special habitats; promotes acquisition and protection of wetlands by other public agencies and by private organizations; promotes restoration and maintenance of wetlands and other special habitats on public and private property; provides information to the public on the value of wetlands and other special habitats and the need to protect

them; and influences and supports wetland conservation provisions of federal farm programs. Snakes that are struck while crossing roads or are victims of indiscriminate killings are also major causes for the species' decline. Division personnel work to inform and educate the public about the Eastern massasauga in an effort to reduce these mortality factors. The Division distributes G. L. Denney's Ohio's Reptiles. This booklet is a fact-filled presentation that includes brief discussions of Ohio's snakes, including the massasauga. It has helped stimulate interest in and appreciation for reptiles.

In 1976, a Division of Wildlife regulation was passed which, in effect, prohibited the taking or killing of all reptiles and amphibians, except turtles and frogs, on Division of Wildlife controlled lands. This measure extends a level of protection to the Eastern massasauga, which is listed as a species of special interest in Ohio. A species of special interest is one that might become threatened under continued or increased stress.

### **Viewing Opportunities**

Killdeer Plains, Mosquito Creek, and Spring Valley wildlife areas and the Cedar Bog Natural Area currently support massasauga rattlesnake populations.

Massasauga rattlers are typically found resting under flat boards, metal, or other discarded material. They often bask in the sunlight in clearings and openings.

These snakes are quite timid and pose no threat to people if they are left alone. Snakes do not seek out people to bite; striking and biting is a defensive measure on the part of the snake. The risk of snake bite is highly overrated; annually, more people die from bee stings or lightning strikes than from snake bites.

Massasaugas are active and found most commonly in April, May, and October; they are less likely to be encountered during the months of July, August, and September.

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### Classified Advertising Policy

GCHS Members may run a free classified ad of 7 lines or less at no charge for an unlimited time; however, the ad will be canceled after one month unless the editor is informed to continue it. Please include scientific names for the animals with your ad as well as your phone number and area code.

Ads of up to 7 lines for non-member are \$2 per issue; ad charges for items more than 7 lines long are as follows:

Business card size	\$3 per issue
1/4 page	\$6 per issue
2 page	\$10 per issue
Full page	\$20 per issue

**The GCHS is not liable for the quality of the merchandise advertised. The Society also reserves the right to refuse any ad considered inappropriate.**

### Requirements for Submitting Articles to the Forked Tongue

Articles can be submitted via 3.5" floppy disk or hard copy to Editor, GCHS 11470 Gatch Hill Road, Aurora, IN 47001.

Articles may be e-mailed to Grady Calhoun at [gradycalhoun@earthlink.net](mailto:gradycalhoun@earthlink.net).

Black and white photographs can be included with articles. Photo submissions should include your name, phone number, and description of photo on the back. Photos can be returned.

All time dependent submissions must be in the editor's possession no later than the meeting previous to the publication.

### Classifieds

Rats and Mice for sale. Reasonable price. Call Jesse or Tom (513) 876-0579.

Discount: A 10% discount is offered to all card-carrying members of the GCHS at *All Creatures Animal Hospital*. Dr. Dan Meakin, All Creatures, 1894 Ohio Pike, Amelia, OH 45102, 513-797-7387.

Discount: A 10% discount is offered to all card carrying members of the GCHS at Dr. Dahlhausen's Veterinary Clinic, 5989 Meijer Dr., Suite 2, Milford, Ohio 513-576-0131

(Number to left of decimal indicates males; number to right of decimal indicates females; number to right of second decimal indicates number of unknown sex. For example, 3.2.1=3 males, 2 females, and 1 unsexed specimen)

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### Currently Held Positions

President	Grady Calhoun	(812) 926-1206	Vice President	Dean Alessandrini	(513) 347-0099
		(513) 564-6041	Editor	Grady Calhoun	(812) 926-1206
Treasurer	Peggy Fille	(513) 528-4452			(513) 564-6041
Sergeant-at-Arms	Bruce Fille	(513) 528-4452	Education Committee Chairman		
Advisor	Vacant		Peggy Fille		(513) 528-4452
Secretary	Kyle Becker	(513) 831-4898			

### About the GCHS

The Greater Cincinnati Herpetological Society holds monthly meetings which typically consist of a short business section, a refreshment intermission, and a program related to herpetology. Both members and nonmembers are invited to attend. Membership is open to anyone with an interest in reptiles and amphibians. New members may sign up by mail or at the monthly meetings. Members receive monthly issues of *The Forked Tongue* and free classified advertising. Annual dues should be directed to the secretary at the society's mailing address, according to the rates below:

Student	\$10.00	Corresponding	
	\$10.00		
Individual	\$15.00	Sustaining	\$25.00
Family	\$20.00	Institutional	\$30.00
Contributing	\$50.00		

### Why Be a Member?

Receive monthly issues of *The Forked Tongue*

§Meet individuals knowledgeable about herpetoculture

§Have access to captive-bred herps and feeder animals

§Participate in society-sponsored field trips, and outings.

§Receive a 10 percent discount on herp-related items and services when you show a valid membership card at the following establishments:

Delhi Pet Center (513) 451-4015

Kentucky Reptile Zoo (606) 663-9160

Harrison Pet Center (513) 367-1115

All Creatures Animal Hospital (513) 797-7387

Dr. Dahlhausen's Veterinary Clinic (513) 576-0131.

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Cincinnati, OH 45250

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