



BIGGEST SNAKE OF THE APPALACHIANS

THE BLACK RAT SNAKE

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IN THE CENTRAL APPALACHIANS numerous species of snakes exist. The largest of all Appalachian snakes is completely harmless. This giant reptile is the black rat snake. The record length of this snake is well over eight feet long.

Most outdoorsman know these snakes as black snakes. These non-venomous reptiles have long been recognized as beneficial by farmers. During the 1950s and 1960s, six and seven foot black rat snakes were commonplace. Today the largest black rats found are only four or five feet long because it takes about fifteen years for them to reach lengths of seven feet. Most of these conspicuous snakes are killed by cars while crossing highways, by predators, or by humans prior to attaining full growth.

Black rat snakes bodies are almost a solid black color, with faint, hard to distinguish white lines running across their body. This nearly solid black color absorbs sunlight and allows these cold blooded reptiles to thermo regulate on cool days. Interestingly all black rat snakes exhibit white lower jaws. Young black rat snakes are black and grey colored for camouflage purposes. They do not turn solid black until they reach three feet in length.

The appearance of black rat snakes is dissimilar to copperheads and timber rattlers, the only venomous snakes in the central Appalachians. These poisonous snakes display heavily blotched, contrasting colors on their thick bodies. Moreover they exhibit broad triangular heads and thin necks.

There is an old wives tale that black rat snakes can cross breed with rattlesnakes. This is completely untrue. Their genes are too far apart to splice. For example black rat snakes lay eggs, whereas rattlesnakes are live born.

Most agriculturists recognize the value of black rat snakes on farms because they destroy rodents with a vengeance; hence their name, black RAT snake. Wherever they live destructive disease carrying mice and rats are kept in check or eliminated.

The most powerful weapon of the black rat snake is their sense of smell. A good portion of their brain has olfactory bulbs which interpret chemical particles gathered by the flicking of their forked tongue. This sensory system is called the Jacobson organ, whose whole function is to sort out smells. Consequently a black rat snake can quickly determine without seeing, friend or foe, or food item. Many experts think a snake's ability to track a prey species is superior to a bloodhound. For example once a black rat starts on the trail of a mouse, the mouse is doomed. If the mouse climbs a tree the black rat will follow; black rat snakes are excellent tree climbers. If the mouse goes down a hole or into a tangle the black rat will pursue until seizing the mouse.

Black rat snakes have poor eyesight. They can only focus their eyes at one distance; this is usually the striking distance of their prey. Nevertheless, they see and react to movement. Their hearing however, is also limited. Black rat snakes mainly pick up vibrations of sound, most times from the ground as animals or humans approach them.

In Maryland, West Virginia and Pennsylvania there are a number of hobbyists who breed snakes for pets. They are almost a secret society. These snake breeders call themselves "herpers"; not to be confused with herpetologists. This group has developed at least twelve color variations of black rat snakes ranging from solid white to orange.



These snakes make excellent pets: raised in captivity, parasite free, and adapted to confinement. They take cool temperatures far better than boas or pythons; moreover, black rat snakes also can be hibernated.

Above left: Floyd Presley handles three color variants of Black Rat Snakes — the Rusty, Red Albino, and Leucistic.

Above right: A Red Albino Black Rat Snake.

Below: A Blue Eyed Leucistic Black Rat Snake.

