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NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Great Basin Gopher Snake

Pituophis cantenifer



The great basin gopher snake's scientific name is *Pituophis cantenifer*. This snake is a non-venomous member of the Colubridae family and the largest snake species in BC.

Characteristics

A full grown great basin gopher snake averages about 70 – 200cm long. They are light brown or yellowish-brown in color with dark brown or black squares running from head to tail. Their under belly is a creamy color with irregular small dark blotches. The snake has the three distinct markings on its head:

- Horizontal band between eyes
- Vertical line running from below the eye to the upper jaw
- Angled strip running from yet to angle of jaw.

Behaviour

The great basin gopher snake mates in May, ovulates in June, and deposits its eggs in late June and early July. A female lays two to eight eggs in abandoned rodent burrows, sand substrates, flat areas, or south facing slopes. These nests contain the eggs of several females of the same and different species. The eggs' incubation period is 60 - 80 days, hatching in late August and early September. These snakes hibernate from November to March. The life expectancy of the great basin gopher snake is about 10 – 14 years.

In general, regardless of geographic region, the great basin gopher snake feeds on rodents and birds. In BC's south Okanogan, 91% of their diet consists of small rodents, voles, pocket mice, and deer mice; the remaining 9% consists of young birds. In California, they feed on various mammals and birds, such as mice, kangaroo rats, gophers, ground squirrels, rabbits, quail and ducks and their eggs, and lizards. This snake has proved valuable to farmers, as they are a

means of pest control for rodents. Unlike venomous snakes, gopher snakes use constriction to kill their prey before swallowing it whole.

To indicate that they feel threatened, the great basin gopher snake will hiss loudly and rattle its tail. This behavior often leads people to mistakenly identify the snake as a rattlesnake.

Habitat

The great basin gopher snake lives mainly in western North America. It can be found in these specific locations:

- In Canada: the BC southern interior
- In the United States: Washington, Oregon, Colorado, Nevada, Wyoming, Arizona, California, and New Mexico to name a few states.

They most often live in dry sandy areas, scrub, pine woodlands, plains, abandoned fields, and deserts, but they also favour cultivated fields, grass, and brush. In BC, they live in dry grassland valleys.

Threats

The great basin gopher snake has few natural enemies. These however include large raptors, such as hawks, eagles and owls, other snakes, coyotes and badgers. Man however is their greatest threat coming in the form of habitat destruction or alteration such as the urbanization of rural areas, agriculture, and cattle grazing. In addition, many people kill snakes out of fear and misunderstanding.

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