

Gulf Salt Marsh Snake

Nerodia clarkii



PHOTO BY PAUL FREED



In Texas, the gulf salt marsh snake lives where few other water snakes venture—they thrive in brackish waters. Because coastal wetlands are continuously being drained, filled, developed and contaminated, gulf salt marsh snakes run a serious risk of becoming threatened or endangered due to habitat loss.

Coastal Wetlands

Gulf Salt Marsh Snake

Nerodia clarkii



APPEARANCE

Length: 15 to 30 inches (38 to 76 cm)

Distinguishing Characteristics

- Two longitudinal tan or yellow stripes on each side of the body make up the *dorsal* (top) pattern of the snake.
- Reddish-brown or grayish-black *ventral* (bottom) color with one to three rows of large pale spots along the center of the belly
- Flat headed

LIFE HISTORY

Range: Along the Gulf Coast

Diet: Small fish, crabs, shrimp and other invertebrates

Predators: Egrets, herons and crabs

Sexual maturity: At three years

Mating season: Early spring

Gestation: Live birth. Born during July and August.

Young: The babies are 7 to 9 inches (17 to 22 cm) long at birth.

Life Span: Up to 20 years

HABITAT

Just as the name indicates, Gulf salt marsh snakes prefer brackish and saltwater estuaries, salt marshes and tidal mud flats.

BEHAVIOR

As a way to avoid predators, salt marsh snakes are *nocturnal* (active at night) and often hide in shoreline debris and in crab burrows in the mud or sand.

NOW YOU KNOW!

The gulf salt marsh snake does not have salt glands to help rid itself of the salt it eats so it must be very careful not to drink salt water. It gets moisture from rainfall and from the animals it eats.

GULF SALT MARSH SNAKES AND PEOPLE

Because they are difficult to find, we know relatively little about gulf salt marsh snakes. When they are found, people often confuse the non-venomous gulf salt marsh snake with venomous species such as the cottonmouth. The general shape of a poisonous snake's head is triangular while a non-poisonous snake's head is slender and almost flush with the rest of its body. If you look at a cottonmouth from above, you can see the eyes. You can't see the eyes of a water snake from above. They are on the sides of the snake's head. Water snakes' eyes have a round pupil; the cottonmouth (and other pit vipers) have pupils similar to cats (a vertical slit).