

Eastern Ratsnakes and the Department of Defense



The Eastern Ratsnake (*Pantherophis alleghaniensis*) is a large nonvenomous snake that is commonly encountered on military properties in Atlantic coastal states. It gets its name from its preferred prey and is often tolerated in barns by farmers despite its occasional predation on chicken eggs, hence its colloquial name, “chicken snake.”

Description: Eastern Ratsnakes typically reach total lengths of 42-72 inches (107-183 cm), but old individuals can exceed 8 feet (244 cm). Coloration varies across the range, from black in northern populations to gray, brown, and yellow with dark dorsal and side blotches or stripes in southern populations. In contrast to adults, juveniles exhibit a strong pattern of black to dark brown blotches dorsally on a peppered black-and-white to gray body.

Range: This species occurs from New England to southern Florida, east of the Appalachian Mountains, east of the Apalachicola River in Florida, and east of the Chattahoochee River in Georgia. The western edge of its range is poorly defined, with a large area of taxonomic uncertainty involving hybridization with the Gray Ratsnake (*P. spiloides*) extending from eastern New York and New England to northern Georgia.

Habitat: Eastern Ratsnakes occur in a wide variety of habitats, including hardwood forest and woodland, swamps, farmland, old fields, barnyards, and rural buildings. They are frequently found where wooded and open habitats (such as fields or farmland) are intermixed.

Behavior: This snake is active during both the day and night (generally the latter during the warmer time of the year). It is an excellent climber and spends much of its time in trees, where its presence is often revealed by a flock of screaming blue jays or other scolding songbirds. Prey is killed by constriction. The whitish, oblong eggs are laid in a variety of places, including arboreal cavities of hardwood trees. When frightened, ratsnakes often assume a “kinked” posture and remain motionless. If threatened, they may vibrate the tail, expel musk and strike repeatedly.

Military Interactions: This is a conspicuous and commonly encountered snake species on DoD properties in the eastern U.S., both in military training and housing areas. It is one of few large snakes that will readily enter buildings.

Conservation Status: The Eastern Ratsnake has no federal conservation status. It is state-endangered in Maine and state-threatened in Vermont. It has a NatureServe Raking of G5-Secure, and is listed as Least Concern by the IUCN Red list.

Threats/Planning Considerations: Threats include major or widespread destruction of habitats (e.g., significant loss and conversion of vacant land into urban developments), human persecution, and road mortality. A habitat management practice to benefit this species is to retain old structures standing rather than removing them.

Occurrence on Military Lands

Confirmed	Potential
Confirmed present on 72 military properties (13 Air Force; 28 Army; 6 Marine Corps; and 25 Navy).	Up to an additional 47 military properties (18 Air Force; 9 Army; 2 Marine Corps; and 18 Navy).

