



Corn Snake

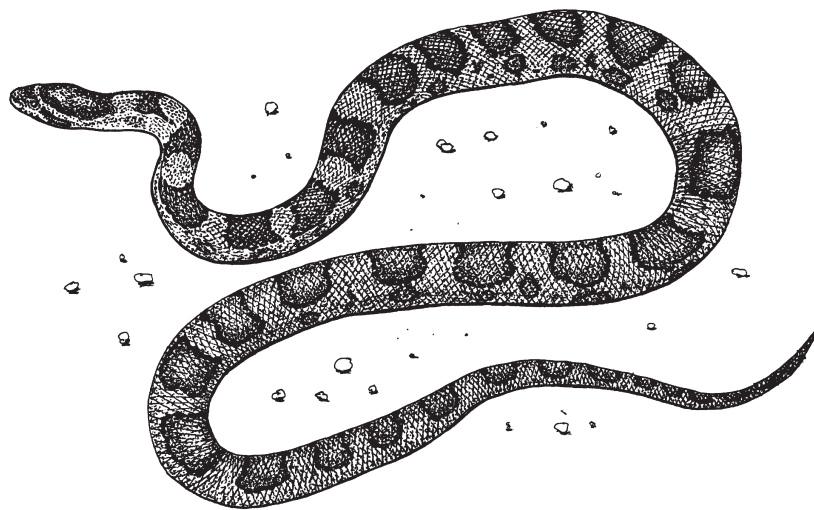
Elaphe guttata

This beautiful snake is one of North Carolina's most colorful, attractive and popular reptiles. Its common name is derived from its resemblance to the color and pattern of Indian corn—not from its habitat or diet. It is also sometimes called “red rat snake.”

Corn snakes have become very popular in the pet trade in recent years. Their beauty, availability, medium size, docile nature and tendency to thrive in captivity make them the ideal pet snake. Like hamsters, goldfish and budgerigar parakeets, they have been bred—particularly albinos and other mutant strains—to the point of virtual domestication. Many herpetologists feel that this is unfortunate, especially since escaped or intentionally liberated individuals—which are increasingly common—may threaten native populations by introducing harmful genetic material.

History and Status

Though not listed under any category of special protection, the corn snake is probably declining throughout most of North Carolina. Many populations have been severely reduced or eliminated, and most face continued threats from habitat destruction, alteration and fragmentation; from largely unregulated commercial collecting; and from persecution of individuals. Huge numbers are killed by motor vehicles. Despite these threats, the corn snake is still common in some places, and its future appears secure in a few fairly well-protected areas.



Description

A corn snake's dorsal ground color is orange, reddish, gray or brownish with prominent large reddish brown middorsal blotches and smaller lateral blotches bordered with black. The belly is boldly marked with a black-and-white checkerboard pattern. There is usually a blotch resembling a spear point on top of the head. Some large males may have four faint, dark longitudinal stripes. The glossy, almost iridescent scales usually have weak keels that are faint or absent in juveniles. A corn snake's relatively slender body is shaped like a loaf of bread in cross-section, the flat belly meeting the sides of the body at an angle, unlike the more cylindrical bodies of most snakes. This body shape may be an adaptation for climbing.

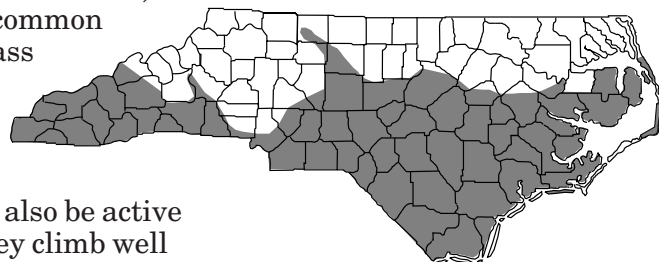
Habitat and Habits

Corn snakes inhabit a wide variety of terrestrial habitats, but they are most common in the pine-wiregrass flatwoods and sandhills of the Coastal Plain. They are largely nocturnal but may also be active during the day. They climb well but are most often found on the ground. Secretive, they fre-

quently take refuge in stump holes or rodent burrows or under surface cover. Old building sites with abundant scrap metal and other debris are good places to encounter corn snakes. Juveniles often hide under loose bark on logs or dead trees, especially in pine forests. Individuals are frequently encountered on roads at night.

When frightened or alarmed, a corn snake normally attempts to escape. A cornered individual may assume a defensive posture, vibrating its tail and striking repeatedly. Temperament varies, however, and some specimens never attempt to bite, even when first caught. Most captives quickly become docile. Like all our other snakes, corn snakes produce a foul-smelling musk from glands beneath the base of their tail.

Corn snakes kill active prey—largely mice and other small mammals—by constriction.



Range Map:
Occupied range

Corn Snake
(30-72 in.)Scarlet Snake
(14-26 in.)Pine Woods Snake
(10-15 in.)

They have a strong feeding response, and captives have been known to feed immediately after capture. Their natural predators include hawks, carnivorous mammals, eastern kingsnakes and black racers.

In winter, corn snakes hibernate in burrows below the frost line, but they may emerge to bask on warm days.

Range and Distribution

The corn snake occurs in disjunct populations throughout much of the southeastern United States from southern New Jersey to Key West, and west to the Mississippi River. Its distribution is very spotty in some areas. It has been introduced on Grand Cayman Island south of Cuba.

Corn snakes range over much of North Carolina but are apparently absent from the northern Mountains and the extreme northeastern Coastal Plain. Records are lacking from many areas, especially in the western and northeastern Piedmont. The snakes are most common in the southeastern Coastal Plain.

People Interactions

Interactions between humans and corn snakes run from one extreme to the other. Many persons still hate and fear snakes and kill the completely harmless corn snake on sight, either mistaking it for a venomous species or simply killing it because it is a snake. Other individuals breed corn snakes in a bewildering array of color and pattern mutations to

meet an ever-increasing demand for these animals as pets.

At each extreme lies a certain blindness to the truth about corn snakes. It is true that they eat rodents and may thus be considered "economically beneficial." It is true that as pets they may provide their keepers enjoyment, as well as some measure of appreciation for snakes and other creatures. There is also money to be made selling corn snakes, and they must thus be considered commercially valuable. But the real worth of a corn snake is much greater than these values. It is a masterpiece of evolution, a living gem, an intricate element of nature that cannot be improved upon—at least not by humans.

References

Martof, Bernard S., William M. Palmer, Joseph R. Bailey and Julian R. Harrison III. *Amphibians and Reptiles of the Carolinas and Virginia* (University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

Palmer, William M., and Alvin L. Braswell. *Reptiles of North Carolina* (University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

Credits

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CORN SNAKE

Classification

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Family: Colubridae

Average Size

30 to 48 in.; record 72 in. Males often grow larger than females.

Food

Mostly rodents and other small mammals and birds and their eggs. Juveniles in particular also eat lizards and frogs, especially tree frogs.

Breeding

Most mating apparently takes place in the spring. Females lay a single clutch of 3 to 31 white, leathery-shelled eggs in late spring or early summer, in a damp, sheltered spot such as a rotten log, tree cavity or sawdust pile. Eggs hatch in late summer or early fall with no parental care.

Young

Hatchlings average 12 to 14 in. in length, and about the thickness of a pencil. They resemble adults but are normally more drab, with dark reddish brown blotches on a grayish background. They are normally sexually mature by their third year.

Life Expectancy

One individual lived over 32 years in captivity. Most wild corn snakes probably do not survive to adulthood.