

The Mysterious, Iridescent Indigo

By: Corine Burgess

The Latin name for the Eastern Indigo snake is *Drymarchon couperi*, which roughly translated, means “Lord of the Forest.” The Indigo snake is unique in many ways; it is certainly one of the most beautiful species of snakes, it is the largest indigenous snake in the United States reaching lengths of nine feet, and it is known to be somewhat gentle in temperament. These creatures are dubbed indigo because of their iridescent black-blue-purple scales which, when seen in sunlight may look dark blue. They are truly amazing reptiles.

Indigos are non-venomous and can be identified not only by their iridescent skin, but the reddish and tan coloration on their throat, cheek and chin. They prefer flatwoods, scrub, hammocks, fields and other high ground communities. They enjoy sandy soils and are often found sharing the burrow of a local gopher tortoise. They travel mostly in the summer time when it is warm and have been known to journey as much as 273 acres. But in the winter they are more apt to stay in one area. They can't tolerate the cold weather and generally hold up in a burrow or debris pile until the warmer temperatures arrive.

As with all snakes, the indigo is carnivorous and will eat just about any critter it can catch. To subdue prey, the snake has been known to beat it against a nearby object such as a rock or tree. This action can be quite violent and the snake may even be injured while restraining its catch. Indigos are known rattlesnake killers. These blue creatures will indeed kill other snakes and they don't seem to mind if the prey is venomous or not. In fact, it is said to be immune to the venom of the North American rattlesnakes. Other than that, they will dine on frogs, lizards, turtles, birds, small mammals and eggs. They hunt during the day and travel long distances in search for prey, which they swallow whole and alive.

Oddly enough, the eastern indigo rarely bites when handled. It has the reputation of being a “gentle” snake. However, that does not mean that it won't try to defend itself from predators or when it feels threatened. When in defensive mode, it will flatten its neck, hiss and vibrate its tail. Many snakes practice these moves when they are frightened or threatened in any way.

Unfortunately, these beautiful creatures are disappearing at an alarming rate for many reasons. Many people are fascinated by the mystical creature and since they are somewhat gentle, they have been captured for the pet trade. Of course, habitat destruction is the main reason for their status. They need quite a bit of territory and when their habitat is destroyed, they cannot survive. Another cause for their low population numbers is gassing gopher tortoise burrows in an effort to round up rattlesnakes that also inhabit the tunnels in which they dwell.

The indigo snake is an integral part of many plant communities particularly the scrub ecosystems. Because of the relationship with the gopher tortoise and the sharing of its home, both species must be protected if the other is to survive. To protect these important species, conservation and proper management of large tracts of natural areas is necessary. Since the indigo travels from ecosystem to ecosystem, fragmentation of habitat is a huge dilemma for the snake. Wildlife corridors and uninterrupted protected areas are vital for its survival.

Fortunately, eastern indigo snakes are federally protected as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The State of Florida also lists them as protected. They have an average life span of 15 years, so if they are left alone and their habitat is saved from destruction, it is possible that their numbers will increase and their story may have a happy ending.

Indigo Facts:

- The eastern indigo is diurnal, living in a communal existence with the gopher tortoise. It stays in the burrow to prevent dehydration and to stay warm in low temperatures.
- The eastern indigo snake is in severe decline. Its habitat is prime land for development because it is usually the best draining soil. Because of declining populations, the indigo is one of the most protected snakes in the U.S. Laws are very strict concerning touching, catching, killing or in any way harassing the creature.
- At one time the indigo was a popular snake in the pet trade. It has all the characteristics that make pets popular. It is large, clam and beautiful.
- The eastern indigo has one of the most varied diets of any snake in the world. It is capable of eating mammals, amphibians, birds and even venomous snakes. But most surprising is that it is one of the only snakes known to eat young turtles. It does all of this without venom or constriction. It relies on its surprising strong jaws and by holding the animal down with its body.