



VENOMOUS SNAKES FACT SHEET SERIES

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Pigmy Rattlesnake

Sistrurus miliarius

Pigmy Rattlesnakes are the smallest of the three rattlesnake species found in Georgia. They are also known widely as ground rattlers.

Description

There are two subspecies in Georgia, the Dusky (*S. m. barbouri*) and the Carolina (*S. m. miliarius*). Like other pit vipers, the pigmy (also spelled 'pygmy') rattlesnakes are heavy bodied, with a blocky head. They have a small heat-sensitive pit on their upper lip in between their nostril and their eye. This helps in determining warmth of an area and accurate striking at prey. The largest individual was 31 inches long, but adults are usually between 16 and 21 inches. Newborns are tiny at about 5 inches. The head has 9 large scales on it, whereas the other two species of rattlesnakes have small scales covering the head. The body is covered in keeled scales. The tail is slender and ends in a very small rattle. There is a row of solid dark spots that runs the length of the back, which may or may not have a reddish or orange stripe underneath. There is a row of spots on the side of the body as well. The Dusky subspecies has a third row of dark smudges or spots. The Dusky subspecies tends to be ashy gray, with dark stippling on top, giving an overall dirty or dusty appearance. The Carolina subspecies can have a brownish, bluish gray or reddish background color, and tends to be very clean looking. Juveniles look like miniature adults but have a bright yellow-green tail tip. This is used as a caudal lure for prey.



Photo by Berkeley Boone

Range & Habitat

The Carolina subspecies is found in the Piedmont and Mountain regions of the state, mainly on the eastern side. The Dusky subspecies is found in the lower Coastal Plain. There are wide gaps in their known range. In the United States, pigmy rattlesnakes range from southeastern North Carolina to eastern Texas and Oklahoma. They may be found in a variety of habitats from longleaf pine woods, sandhills, pine flatwoods, scrub, hammocks and pine-hickory forests.

Myth & Legend

Pigmy rattlesnakes are often described as hot-tempered or feisty. This probably stems from one of their defensive behaviors of rapidly waving their tails and jerking their heads back and forth. In reality though, they tend to be slow to strike and rely more on their camouflage to protect them. Their venom is rumored to be incredibly potent, and if they were bigger a bite would certainly kill people. Their venom is actually composed of

mostly cytotoxins, which destroy cells and cause a lot of swelling. In the rare circumstance that a bite happens on a human, it is most often on a hand or foot (and even then, usually on a finger or toe) and causes a lot of pain, swelling and bruising. The bites cause a lot of localized tissue damage and there is often scarring or mild disfiguration that can occur.

Similar Looking Species

The pigmy rattlesnake is often confused with the hognose snakes, and particularly the southern hognose snake (*Heterodon simus*). They both have stout bodies and blunt heads, and a row of dark spots on the back with an orangeish stripe. But the hognose snakes also have a thick tail that does not end in a rattle, and a very pointed, sharply upturned snout.



At a quick glance, this Southern Hognose Snake has a similar look to the pigmy rattlesnake. Photo by Berkeley Boone

Natural History

Pigmy rattlesnakes can be found active mostly during the daytime. During the summer they may be more active in the early evening hours and



Pigmy rattlesnakes are polymorphic and can come in a variety of background colors. Photo by Berkeley Boone

through the night. Summertime and into autumn is often a time of high surface activity particularly for male snakes, as this is their breeding season. Baby rattlesnakes are born at this time as well, but from breedings that occurred last year. Litter size may be up to 12 babies. Though captives have lived for over fifteen years, life spans in the wild are not well known.

Like other snakes and reptiles, rattlesnakes are poikilothermic, meaning that they are dependent on surrounding temperatures and conditions for their body temperature, and cannot maintain it on their own. In cooler weather, especially in the northern parts of the state, they may enter a period of dormancy. The snakes utilize stump holes, rock piles and crevices or small animal burrows for shelter. The rattles on the ends of the tails are very small,

and not quite as developed as the rattles on the other rattlesnake species. When rattled, the sound is very faint, and often compared to the sound of a small insect buzzing. Pigmy rattlesnakes are ambush predators and will wait, often for days, for prey to come within striking range. Prey consists of small frogs, lizards and small mice. Large invertebrates are also eaten. Raccoons, opossums, foxes, birds of prey, racers and kingsnakes are all predators of pigmy rattlesnakes.

Conservation

Pigmy rattlesnakes seem to have localized distribution and may be common in locations where they are found. Due to their small size though and quiet lifestyle, it is possible they have not been documented in areas where they do occur. Populations appear to be stable, and the biggest threats are common: habitat loss, roads, and persecution by humans. The snakes are often killed simply because they are a rattlesnake.