massasauga

Sistrurus catenatus

Kingdom:	Animalia
Division/Phylum:	Chordata - vertebrates
Class:	Reptilia
Order:	Squamata
Family:	Viperidae

Features

The massasauga typically is 18 to 30 inches long. It has a heat-sensitive pit on each side of its head between the eye and the nostril. Its head is flattened and much wider than the neck. The pupil of each eye is vertically elliptical (like cat eyes). A rattle is present at the tip of the tail. Scales are keeled (ridged). The body is gray with a row of dark blotches down the back. There are three rows of dark spots on the sides.

Natural History

The massasauga lives in wet prairies, peatlands, and old fields. It eats mice, small birds, frogs, and other snakes. It is active during the day, except in the hottest summer months, when it may become nocturnal. The massasauga may take shelter in crayfish burrows or other underground cavities. It may be seen basking on grass, near crayfish burrows, or in other open locations. It may shake its rattle if disturbed. The rattle develops as skin is shed. At birth, a button is present at the tip of the tail. Each time the skin is shed (three to five times a year) a new segment is added to the rattle. Segments may be broken or lost. Mating may occur in spring or fall. Females mature after three to four years and reproduce every other year. The female gives birth to three to 20 young in August or September, the number depending on her size (the larger her size, the greater the number of eggs) and age.

Habitats

wet prairies and fens; natural lakes and prairie marshes; bottomland forests

Iowa Status

endangered, native

Loss of prairie marshes and the decrease in the number of prairie crayfish, whose burrows are used for hibernation, have eliminated habitat needed by massassaugas.

Iowa Range

southern third and eastern third of Iowa

Bibliography

Iowa Department of Natural Resources. 2001. *Biodiversity of Iowa: Aquatic Habitats* CD-ROM.