



Texas Field Notes

Texas Long-nosed Snake

Rhinocheilus lecontei tessellatus

For the most part, snakes with bright red and black colors receive lots of attention from herpers. Milk snakes and mountain kingsnakes are well-known and widely appreciated. In southwest Texas, hobbyists flip rocks all day looking for Mexican or New Mexico milk snakes, but there is another pretty snake in that same area that gets written down in the field notes as an “also seen.” The Texas long-nosed snake is a beautiful animal with interesting variations in pattern, but it does not get much attention from hobbyists.

Classification

Long-nosed snakes are grouped within the family Colubridae which contains nearly all of our harmless snakes (including kingsnakes, rat snakes, and others).

The name “Rhinocheilus” comes from the Greek words for snout (rhinos) and lip (cheilo), based on this snake’s protruding snout with the lower jaw slightly counter-sunk in a way that probably limits dirt being forced into the mouth as the snake digs. The species name honors John Law-

This article was written by Michael Smith and originally published in 2007 in the *Cross Timbers Herpetologist*, newsletter of the Dallas-Fort Worth Herpetological Society

“Texas Herp” is an Internet resource on Texas herpetofauna • P.O. Box 173283 • Arlington, Texas 76003-3283

michael@texasherp.org • <http://texasherp.org>

© 2007, 2010, All Rights Reserved

Texas Long-nosed Snake (continued)

rence Le Conte, a physician who was an active naturalist in the mid-1800s and collected the type specimen of the long nosed snake. The subspecies name is based on Latin words referring to a mosaic or tiles, referring to the pattern.

In a 2004 paper, Mollie Manier examined characteristics of 266 preserved specimens and concluded that there was not enough differentiation to support different subspecies of *R. lecontei*. Time will tell if this view comes to be accepted; meanwhile, this article relies on the SSAR list of scientific and common names, which recognizes *R. l. tessellatus*.

Description

This is a moderately-sized snake, usually measuring 20 to 30 inches long. The record length is 41 inches. At first glance, most long-nosed snakes give the appearance of a red-and-black snake with a lot of speckling.

There are a series of black saddles running down the back, squarish on top and tapering toward the side. These saddles are edged in a cream color, and between them is a red or red-orange square that fades as it progresses down the snake's side. The pattern is clear at the top of the snake's back, but the sides are liberally speckled, obscuring the pattern. The black saddles are speckled with cream, while the red is speck-

led with a smudgy black. Often there is a suggestion of an additional narrow black blotch on the sides between the black saddles.

The belly is generally a cream or off-white, sometimes with a few black speckles. Occasionally, long-nosed snakes turn up with a great deal of black on the belly. One juvenile found in Brewster County had large, regularly-spaced black blotches down the venter.



Individual from Val Verde County, TX

The head is principally black but usually with a reddish snout, and the head is speckled as well. The snout is extended forward and somewhat pointed, but does not turn up like that of a hognose or a hook-nosed snake.

The scales of the back are smooth, and the anal plate is

undivided. It is the only North American nonvenomous snake to have *undivided caudal scales* (underneath the tail).

In parts of the Big Bend, long-nosed snakes sometimes have a very faded pattern with reduced red or red that is faded to a salmon color and lots of off-white in the pattern.

Hatchlings have less speckling and reduced red color. The black saddles are very bold.

Distribution & Habitat

The Texas long-nosed snake is found from Texas northward into parts of Kansas and westward into New Mexico. In Texas, it occupies an area west of a line running roughly between Dallas and Fort Worth, along the Balcones Escarpment, and down through south Texas west of Brownsville.

Preferred habitat includes semi-arid grasslands, areas of mesquite and prickly pear cactus, south Texas thornscrub, and Chihuahuan desert. These tend to be gravelly or sandy areas, but Werler & Dixon (2000) note that long-nosed snakes don't do as well in extreme desert conditions and prefer loamy, organically fortified soils. They have been collected, years ago, from the prairie and cross timbers habitats west of Fort Worth, but few are seen there now.

Prey

Among the principal prey items are lizards, and these snakes are very well-adapted for rooting lizards out of burrows and crevices while cruising at night. Long-nosed snakes have a reputation as dedicated lizard-eaters, but many will accept mice. Tennant & Bartlett (2000) mention individuals from some populations even preferring mice. In captivity, some of these snakes may need lizard scenting at first, but some take mice at the first offering. Long-nosed snakes are constrictors. These snakes have relatively small heads and mouths, and while they easily accommodate lizard shapes, mice are more of

a "stretch" and smaller prey should be offered. Discussions among hobbyists also tend to note that these snakes may become obese if fed mice on a frequent schedule.

Behavior

Although hatchlings may be belligerent, adult long-nosed snakes are shy and inoffensive. They may react to threats with tail-rattling and pulling their heads beneath coils of their bodies. They may also discharge musk and blood from the cloaca. There are even reports of agitated long-nosed snakes "autohemorrhaging" blood from the nostrils, similar to the way that horned lizards will occasionally squirt blood from the eyes.

There are numerous reports of these being rather cold-tolerant snakes. They are largely nocturnal, and evidently are sometimes found when temperatures are too cool for many other snakes to be out.

Reproduction

Long-nosed snakes are egg-laying, with clutches of four to nine eggs laid during the summer months. The eggs hatch about 2 to 2.5 months later. Hatchlings are generally less than ten inches long. As noted above, they are boldly patterned with less speckling and less red color. When I was given several hatchlings, they accepted mice from the beginning (because of size, they were offered parts of very small pinkie mice).

Abundance

This was a species I wanted to see for quite some time, but I was unsuccessful in north and central Texas. My luck changed when I began making trips to the Trans Pecos. They are considered locally abundant in parts of south and west Texas, but seem to be much less common in north and central Texas.

(continued)

Texas Long-nosed Snake (continued)

References & Further Reading

- Beltz, Ellin. Names of the Reptiles & Amphibians of North America. Online: <http://ebeltz.net/herps/etymain.html#Snakes>
- Conant, R., and J.T. Collins. 1998. A field guide to reptiles and amphibians: Eastern and central North America (3rd Ed.). Houghton Mifflin, Boston.
- Manier, M.K. 2004. Geographic variation in the Long-nosed Snake, *Rhinocheilus lecontei* (Colubridae): Beyond the subspecies debate. *Biological Journal of the Linnaean Society* 83(1): 65-85.
- Tennant, A., & R.D. Bartlett. 2000. Snakes of North America: Eastern and central regions. Gulf Publishing, Houston.
- Werler, J.E., and J.R. Dixon. 2000. Texas snakes: Identification, distribution, and natural history. University of Texas Press, Austin.



Juvenile with unusual black-blotched pattern on the belly

Please visit us on the web at:
<http://texasherp.org>

For this article, permission is granted for nonprofit educational or personal use and re-distribution as long as the contents are not

changed.
Thank you for reading *Texas Field Notes!*