

Size Isn't Everything

By Frederick Boyce

There is something about snakes that makes them appear to be larger than they actually are—especially to those who are unfamiliar with them and don't see them every day. Over the years, I have made it a practice to automatically deduct two feet from the length of any snake described to me by anyone other than a fellow snake person.

Growing up in rural North Carolina and southern Virginia, it seemed that any black (rat) snake was always "eight foot long." Whereas these handsome black serpents, in exceptional cases, may have been able to attain such prodigious lengths at one time, I am sure there have been none since at least the advent of the automobile, and likely not since Ben Franklin's time. Nowadays, even a six-foot specimen is extremely rare. I have seen a few that size, and they are indeed very impressive, but eight-footers just do not exist.

I was once a weekly guest on a call-in radio show in southern Virginia, answering listeners' questions about snakes on the air. I heard so many claims of "eight-foot black snakes" that I finally offered a reward of \$100 for a bona fide eight-foot specimen—alive and unharmed, of course. It was never claimed.

There appears to be something of an obsession with the size of snakes that I suppose is understandable. I can recall, even in early childhood, rural relatives telling stories of "the biggest copperhead you ever saw." Most snakes, however, especially the ones likely to be encountered by most people in our part of the world, are very much at the other end of the size spectrum, and most commonly seen snakes in our area are going to be measured in inches rather than feet. These include a number of small and secretive species, often referred to as "litter snakes," since their natural habitat is forest litter, but they are frequently encountered in yards and gardens, where they are turned up while digging, or discovered hiding under boards, rocks or other debris. They tend to be nocturnal and burrow more deeply during the hot months of summer, so they are most often seen in the spring and fall. These tiny snakes are utterly harmless to humans or pets but, being snakes, they are often the cause of much unwarranted concern. People are often worried that they might be baby venomous snakes of some kind—such as copperheads—but these small and slender snakes, which grow to no more than a foot or two in length, are already fully grown.



Litter Snakes: Eastern worm snake (left), redbelly snake (middle upper), ringneck snake (middle lower), smooth earth snake (right). Lisa Powers, a wildlife biologist in Tennessee, found all of these small snakes under a piece of tin in her yard. She reported that after a few quick photos they were placed back where found to continue being a vital part of the backyard fauna.—Photo by Lisa Powers

One very common snake that is often seen around houses, even in cities, is the DeKay's, or northern brown snake, *Storeria dekayi*, a normally light-brown snake with a paler stripe down the midline of the back and parallel rows of dark spots on either side. They somewhat resemble miniature garter snakes. In our area, there is an attractive coastal reddish phase. Very similar and closely related to the brown snake is the redbelly snake, *Storeria occipitomaculata*, which, as its name suggests, has a bright red belly. The upper surface can vary from slate gray to cinnamon brown. As with the brown snake, there is also a lovely coastal red phase.

Both of these small snakes live on earthworms and slugs. Redbelly snakes eat slugs almost exclusively, and are thus very beneficial to have in one's garden. They have a light collar around the neck, and might be confused with another small and

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A local gardener holds a rough earth snake, a true "garden snake."—Photo by Fred Boyce



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