

Queensnake (*Reginia septemvittata*)

Family Colubridae (Natricinae)

Subspecies: None currently recognized

Updated 2025



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Description/Identification: The Queensnake is a relatively small to medium-sized, slender-bodied species of semi-aquatic snake usually ranging in total adult length of about 14.9 to 24.1 inches. The head is proportionately small, and only slightly wider or more distinct from the neck and rest of the body. On Queensnakes, there are a total of about 17 scale rows posteriorly, and 19 scale rows anteriorly, and the scales are strongly and heavily keeled. The anal, or ventral scale is also divided, and the pupils are normally round, with reddish-brown irises on the eyes. As with most harmless snakes, Queensnakes have one to two rows of tiny, recurved teeth on the inside of the mouth, on the maxillae and lower quadrate bones of their upper and lower jaws which are normally covered by a fleshy membrane; these teeth, however, are too small to easily or effectively puncture human skin.

The dorsum ground color of Queensnakes can vary from a rich dark brown, lighter brown, to dark gray, which is interrupted by a light yellow, cream, or pale whitish or peach colored stripe on the first and second scale rows along each side of the body. The tops of the heads are usually an unmarked, solid dark brown to darker olive-brown, and the labial scales, chins, and throats, are also pale yellow, white, or peach color, which are contiguous with the lateral stripes. Dorsally, three narrow, darker stripes may also be present, one on the median, and one on scale rows 5 and 6 on each lateral side. Queensnakes have 2 rows of subcaudals on the underside of the tail past the ventral opening, numbering about 23 to 44 rows.

This snakes' scientific name of "septemvittata" are derived from the 7 stripes in total (the three dorsal, and 4 ventral stripes). Neonate and young Queensnakes have more distinct patterning or stripes than adults, while the stripes in older adults can become obliterated or unicolored. The underside or ventral surface is a white to pale yellow in color with 4 darker brown or reddish-brown longitudinal ventral stripes present. Towards the neck and anterior ventral portions, may be suffused with gray. Male and female Queensnakes are similar in size and appearance, except for some dimorphic characteristics in that males have hemipenes, and proportionately longer, less tapering tails than do females. The tongues of Queensnakes are forked, and are usually blackish to dark red or purplish.

Common Gartersnakes (*Thamnophis sirtalis*) can be confused with Queensnakes, but do not have lateral stripes on the very first scale rows, and also lack any darker ventral stripes.

Queensnakes can also sometimes have three (3) darker dorsum stripes running parallel to the lateral stripes, unlike garter snakes, which have lighter stripes contrasting on darker bodies.

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Northern/Common Watersnakes (*Nerodia sipedon*) may also be confused with queen snakes, but are heavier bodied, and also lack ventral-stripes and lateral and dorsal stripes, instead being transversely blotched and banded. No subspecies of the Queensnake are currently recognized.



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Range and Distribution: Queensnakes range from southwestern New York state and western Pennsylvania, through Ohio, Indiana, portions of eastern Michigan and southeastern Wisconsin and northeastern Illinois. They also occur from southeastern Pennsylvania, through the east coast U.S. southwest to Alabama, Mississippi, and disjunct portions of Arkansas.

In Wisconsin, Queensnakes only occur in a very small handful of localities in extreme southeastern Wisconsin, where they are a state of Wisconsin Endangered species. Their range has been reduced from their historic levels drastically in Wisconsin, which historically included the 7 counties of southeastern Wisconsin, but now occur in only perhaps two or three populations in the state.

Habitat: In Wisconsin, Queensnakes have very specific habitat requirements. The preferred habitats for Queensnakes are only those of clean, pristine, spring fed warm-water streams or rivers with moderate to fast currents, and rocky bottoms. These snakes also occupy semi-aquatic shoreline habitats for basking immediately adjacent to or along these rivers or streams, primarily either river-bottom lowland forests or shrub carr, or shrubby areas.

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Ventral/Belly View. © The Canadian

Encyclopedia.

Feeding and Diet: Queensnakes are carnivorous, dietary specialists, feeding almost exclusively upon freshly molted crayfish, of which an ample population of crayfish is another important ecological component for supporting populations of these snakes. Other prey may also occasionally be eaten; including frogs, tadpoles, small newts or salamanders, minnows or small fish, snails, or fairy shrimp on occasion. Queensnakes, like other natricine snakes, simply overpower and swallow any intended prey live in their jaws without the use of constriction. 93% or more of the Queensnake's diet, however, is said to comprise of freshly-molted crayfish mentioned above, which are located primarily through their olfactory, or sense of smell.

Natural History: Queensnakes are very rare snakes in Wisconsin, and finding them usually requires canoeing or kayaking along their preferred basking locations along otherwise largely inaccessible portions of their river and stream habitats. Little is known about the habits and behaviors of Queensnakes in Wisconsin, although they are generally and primarily diurnal snakes, active during the day, emerging from overwintering from mid to late April or May, and remaining active throughout the year until September, October, or early November. Queensnakes overwinter in crayfish burrows, underneath rocks in and near their river and stream habitats, or in artificial structures such as fissures in old bridge abutments, dams, or seawalls and riprap.

Mating and reproduction occur most often during the spring or fall, shortly after or before overwintering from about mid-May through mid-June. These snakes are ovoviparous, giving birth to live young numbering anywhere between five and twenty-three, being born from early to late August or September. The young, measuring 8.26 to 9.05 inches in length, fend on their own immediately upon being born. For the rest of the year, Queensnakes disperse along their summer habitats, foraging for food in the water, and basking on overhanging branches or shrubs, hiding underneath partially submerged flat rocks or rocks near the water, or floating on the surface of the water. In Wisconsin, Queensnakes have been found in more recent years predominately by observing for basking snakes on overhanging vegetation along the water's edge, rather than flipping for them under cover. They bask somewhat less often than Northern/Common Watersnakes, but still have been the primary means in which they have been found in Wisconsin.

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When they are disturbed or threatened, Queensnakes will slide or drop off of their basking sites, into the water, where they may dive and retreat to the bottom, hiding underneath submerged rocks, logs, or other bottom debris. If handled, some Queensnakes may attempt to bite, or expel musk and feces on their captor, but are harmless snakes not capable of causing any harm or damage, and typically calm down quickly.

In Wisconsin, Queensnakes have long been a state Endangered species, due partially to Wisconsin being on the extreme northern periphery of their natural range, and also due largely to the pollution, degradation, and loss of their preferred river and stream habitats in extreme Southeastern Wisconsin, particularly due to agricultural and urban runoff, and due to the invasion of the invasive, non-native rusty crayfish. Drastic declines in populations of their most preferred food source, crayfish, also have a negative impact on these rare snakes in Wisconsin.

Queensnakes can be predated upon by many different species of birds (such as crows, turkeys, kestrels, hawks, owls, and other birds of prey, and wading birds such as herons, cranes, egrets, and bitterns), other larger snakes, and a number of different carnivorous or predatory mammals including domestic cats, foxes, skunks, shrews, raccoons, otters, mink, moles, and opossums. Large, predatory fish, snapping turtles, and large North American Bullfrogs will also eat queen snakes as well.

Conservation Status: In Wisconsin, Queensnakes are currently listed as a “State Endangered” species. They are furthermore regulated and protected along with all other of Wisconsin’s herptiles. Wisconsin likely represents the extreme northern periphery of the Queensnake’s natural range as a result. Queensnakes are currently not protected or regulated federally. Queensnakes are currently IUCN Red-List Least Concern (LC).