

Red-bellied Snake (*Storeria occipitomaculata*)

Family Colubridae (Natricinae)

Subspecies: None currently recognized; Northern Red-bellied Snake (*Storeria occipitomaculata occipitomaculata*)

Updated 2025



Mixed Color Phase, © Mike Day



Gray/Black Color Phase, © Bob Ferguson



© Bob Ferguson



Two-Toned Color Phase, © Richard Williams



Red/Brown Color Phase, © Mike Pingleton

Description/Identification: Red-bellied Snakes are a small species of terrestrial, fossorial snake usually seldom exceeding 7.8 to 9.8 inches in total length, and up to a maximum of about 15.0 inches in total, record length. Red-bellied Snakes have about 15 rows of keeled scales, and the anal plate is divided. The head is relatively short, blunt, and rounded, and the neck is distinctive from the head and body. The pupils are normally round, on a reddish, orangish, or reddish-brown iris color of the eyes. Red-bellied Snakes have 2 rows of subcaudals on the undersides of the tail past the ventral opening, numbering 17 to 31 rows. On the inside of the mouth, Red-bellied Snakes have one to two rows of tiny, recurved teeth 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 top of the head is a slightly darker color than the rest of the body, ranging from a dark reddish-brown, grayish-brown, or brown, and is unpatterned and unmarked. On the nape, or back of the head and neck are three small pale yellowish to whitish or cream colored occipital spots, which may or may not be connected and fused to form an irregular, broken “ring” around the nape and neck. Red-bellied Snakes can be quite variable in color, or in their color phases, and the ground color can range from

Red-bellied Snake (*Storeria occipitomaculata*)

Family Colubridae (Natricinae)

Subspecies: None currently recognized; Northern Red-bellied Snake (*Storeria occipitomaculata occipitomaculata*)

Updated 2025

yellow or yellowish-brown, reddish to reddish-brown, blackish, lighter tan or brown, or gray to steel-gray. A light, broad mid-dorsal longitudinal stripe may be present, lighter than the surrounding ground color, and there often may be two narrow, darker longitudinal stripes running the length of the body below the mid-dorsal stripe on each side, ranging from black to dark brown or gray.

As their common name, “Red-bellied” Snake, might imply, the ventral surface and undersides are usually a bright pinkish, vermillion red, or reddish-orange, with darker bluish or bluish-black edges along the ventral margins and sides. Some individuals, however, may have black or gray undersides, or more yellow undersides. Furthermore, some specimens can have intermittent color phases, or a “two-toned” appearance, with a lighter brown or reddish brown mid-dorsal stripe on a gray or black phase ground color, or vice versa. Several different color phases can all occur in the same areas or populations.

Neonate and newborn Red-bellied Snakes are tiny, and resemble the adults, but range from about 2.75 to 4.33 inches, have a much more prominent “collar” or brighter occipital spots, paler colored undersides, and darker dorsal surfaces. Male and female Red-bellied Snakes are similar in appearance, except for being slightly dimorphic in their sizes and tail lengths, with females being slightly larger, and having proportionately shorter tail lengths than males. The tongues are forked, and darkish red or pinkish in color.

Red-bellied Snakes may oftentimes be confused with Ring-necked Snakes (*Diadophis punctatus*). Ring-necked snakes, however, have smooth scales (as opposed to keeled scales), and a more solid, well-defined rings on the neck or nape. Brown, tan, or reddish color phase Red-bellied Snakes are also often confused with DeKay’s Brownsnakes (*Storeria dekayi*). DeKay’s Brownsnakes, however, lack the brighter colored undersides which Red-bellied Snakes have, instead being a pale white, cream, or much paler pinkish in color, more strongly interrupted stripes or pencil-point linear mid-dorsal stripes or spots, and darker “teardrop” marking beneath each eye, which Red-bellied Snakes lack.

No subspecies of the Red-bellied Snake are presently described, although the Northern Red-bellied Snake (*Storeria occipitomaculata occipitomaculata*) occurs otherwise as a recognized lineage.



© WDNR.

Red-bellied Snake (*Storeria occipitomaculata*)

Family Colubridae (Natricinae)

Subspecies: None currently recognized; Northern Red-bellied Snake (*Storeria occipitomaculata occipitomaculata*)

Updated 2025

Range and Distribution: Red-bellied Snakes range across southern Canada, from the southeastern tip of Saskatchewan, southern Manitoba, Ontario, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia, throughout the New England States in the United States, west to the eastern edge of the Dakotas, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas to the Gulf of Mexico. Isolated, disjunct populations occur further west in the Black Hills region of western South Dakota and northeastern Wyoming.

In Wisconsin, Red-bellied Snakes are common and widespread throughout the state, including in the Apostle Islands, except perhaps in the southern-most tier.



Typical Ventral/Belly View (Same for most color phases). © Kansas Herpetofaunal Atlas.

Habitat: Red-bellied Snakes can be found in a variety of habitats with semi-moist soil, and are said to be more of a woodland and forest dwelling species than the related DeKay's Brownsnake (*Storeria dekayi*). Red-bellied Snakes are secretive, and fossorial snakes, being found under leaf litter, boards, rocks, logs, fallen bark, or under other debris or underground. In many areas, both species of *Storeria* (DeKay's Brownsnakes and Red-bellied Snakes) snakes can be found together in the same habitats or areas. Habitats in which these small snakes may be found in can include boreal forests, northern or southern hardwood forests, mixed forests, open grassy meadows or forest clearings, margins of bogs or marshes, pastures, prairies, old fields, or vacant lots with debris.

Feeding and Diet: Red-bellied Snakes are insectivorous, eating a wide variety of small, soft-bodied insects, insect larvae, small arachnids, or other invertebrates. They will readily eat earthworms or other small worms, slugs, snails, or other soft-bodied invertebrates, primarily by chewing and ingesting their prey live without venom or constriction, as with most small natricine snakes.

Natural History: Red-bellied Snakes are one of the smallest snake species as adults in Wisconsin. These small snakes become active in the year from mid-to late April or May, throughout the year into September or October. Red-bellied Snakes are most often seen in larger numbers moving above ground or out from under cover on warm, rainy, humid summer nights, after heavy rains or storms, or as they travel to or from their overwintering hibernacula by the hundreds, where they may be seen crossing roads, trails, sidewalks, or other open areas.

These small snakes overwinter in ant mounds, old foundations of houses and other buildings, or other small mammal burrows, often with other small snake species in the area, such as with Gartersnakes,

Red-bellied Snake (*Storeria occipitomaculata*)

Family Colubridae (Natricinae)

Subspecies: None currently recognized; Northern Red-bellied Snake (*Storeria occipitomaculata occipitomaculata*)

Updated 2025

Smooth Greensnakes, DeKay's Brownsnakes, and/or juvenile Eastern Foxsnakes and Northern/Common Watersnakes. Mating and copulation occur in the spring and during the fall, and females spend much of their summer incubating their embryos under cover during June, July, and August. Red-bellied Snakes are ovo-viviparous, giving birth to live young in the numbers from two to fourteen or more, which are born from early to late August, or through September. Afterwards, as with most snakes, Red-bellied Snakes provide no brooding or parental care of the young, and they are on their own immediately upon being born.

Red-bellied Snakes are small, harmless, inoffensive snakes which can usually most readily be found through flipping debris along forest or other habitat edges, where these small snakes use such cover for gestating, thermoregulation, or in foraging for food. These small, inoffensive snakes very rarely attempt to bite when handled, and even if these snakes did, their mouths and teeth are extremely tiny, and incapable of resulting in any sort of damage. Upon being uncovered, Red-bellied Snakes will usually try to quickly slip away into thicker vegetation or down holes. When handled, Red-bellied Snakes may emit a foul-smelling musk or defecate to discourage predation, and may overturn their bodies to display their brighter underside coloration as a means of startling predators with bright colors, or to signify their potential toxicity. Some Red-bellied Snakes may exhibit a peculiar "lip-curling" behavior, the purpose for which is not yet fully known or understood. Red-bellied Snakes may also stiffen their bodies and "play dead" as a defense.

Small snake species such as Red-bellied Snakes can be predated upon by many different species of birds (such as crows, turkeys, cranes, kestrels, hawks, and other small birds of prey), other larger snakes, and a number of different carnivorous or predatory mammals including domestic cats, foxes, skunks, shrews, raccoons, moles, and opossums.

Conservation Status: In Wisconsin, Red-bellied Snakes are listed as "Common". They are still regulated and protected along with all other of Wisconsin's herptiles, however under N.R. 16. Red-bellied Snakes are currently not protected or regulated federally. Red-bellied Snakes are currently IUCN Red-List Least Concern (LC).