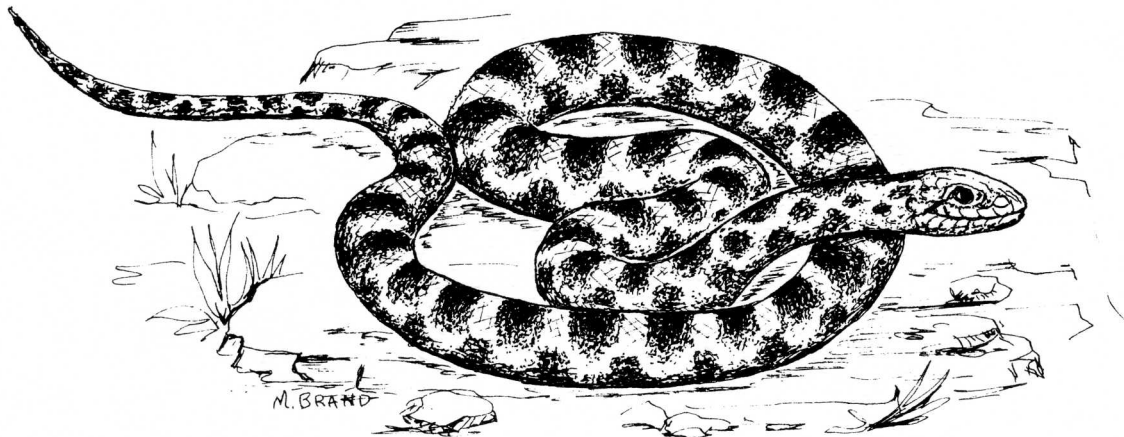


Naturalist Notebook

RIVER BEND NATURE CENTER

Illustrations by Moe Brand • Text by Lindsay Jarombek, Intern Naturalist



Fox Snake

Condylura cristata

When out for a hike at River Bend Nature Center, do not be alarmed if you stumble upon a snake that responds to your presence with a vibrating tail. Your first inclination may be to classify this seemingly menacing serpent as a rattlesnake, but in truth what you have found is likely to be a Fox Snake. This sneaky reptile has a habit of imitating its more dangerous cousin the rattlesnake, but is not venomous. However, don't approach it without care just yet. The Fox Snake may not be poisonous, but it still packs a mighty strike.

The Fox Snake's rattle is not the only reason that it is often misidentified. Its appearance is very similar to a number of other species making it relatively easy to confuse with other snakes. The mature Fox Snake ranges from 36 to 54 inches long with an unmarked reddish-brown head and a blotched dorsal pattern. The base color is a sooty brown or tan, and the dorsal spots are dark brown or black. The underside of the snake is pale yellow and also exhibits brown-black rectangular blotches.

Fox Snake habitat extends across the southern half of the state, mostly concentrated in river bottom forests and upland hardwoods located in the major river valleys. This reptile commonly preys on chipmunks, mice, ground squirrels, and other small mammals, although it will also take birds and bird eggs. A forceful constrictor, the Fox Snake subdues its prey in body coils, dispatching the victim through suffocation. It emerges from hibernation in mid-April and is active through October.

The Minnesota DNR classifies the Fox Snake as a special concern species. Although the exact abundance of the reptile is unclear, it is suspected that the Fox Snake population in Minnesota is dwindling. The decline is probably due to habitat alteration and automobile mortality.