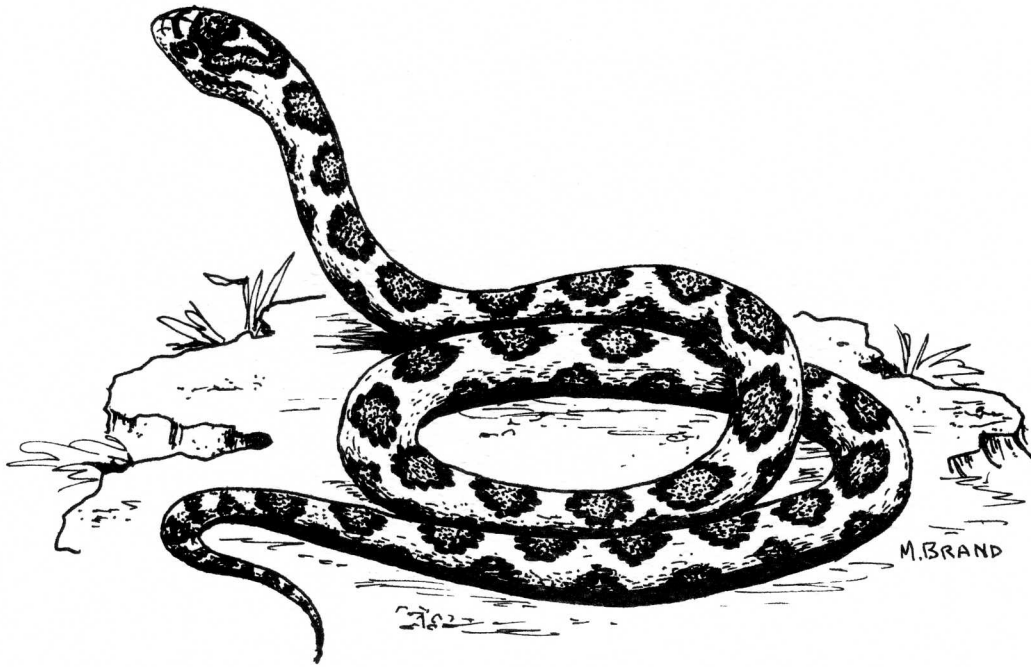


Naturalist Notebook

RIVER BEND NATURE CENTER

Illustrations by Moe Brand ~Text by Nick Weyer, Naturalist Educator Intern



Milk Snake - *Lampropeltis triangulum*

Commonly a victim of misidentification, the milk snake is neither venomous nor any danger to humans. These cases of mistaken identity are due to the coloration and activity of the milk snake being similar to both the coral snake and the rattlesnake. Numerous varieties of the milk snake have color rings that go around their bodies, from their head to tail, giving an appearance very close to the coral snake. These varieties of milk snakes have colored rings of yellow/white, black and red/orange. Much like rattlesnakes, the milk snake will also shake their tail when provoked, and may strike out and bite. However, because milk snakes are not venomous, there is no need to fear any injection of poison.

Milk snakes are found from New England south to Florida, and west through Colorado. Within southern Minnesota, the snakes make their homes amid open fields, wooded areas, rocky hillsides, and wetland environments. Within these habitats they live in and around stones, rotting logs, ground litter and old abandoned buildings. Sometimes these buildings include barns, which helped give milk snakes their name. The snakes got their names after being falsely accused of milking cows while inside the barns. Even though they are not afraid of being in the vicinity of humans, milk snakes are usually secretive in nature, and come out of hiding in the dark.

The length of milk snakes averages between 20 to 50 inches. During the winter months, milk snakes will hibernate in the ground because they are cold blooded, thus it is too cold for them to survive above ground. In addition to that, the majority of their food sources are also hibernating below the ground. Before emerging in the warmer spring months, milk snakes will stay in their hibernation den and mate. After mating, they disperse and the female will lay an average of 10 eggs in a small place sheltered from weather. After an incubation period lasting around 8 weeks, the eggs hatch and brightly colored snakes emerge.

Milk snakes feed mainly on small rodents, including voles, mice and small rats. In addition, milk snakes will also eat lizards, some snakes, small birds, and snake and bird eggs. Milk snakes kill their prey by suffocating it through constriction, then swallow their meal whole. Due to their ability to eat so many rodents, milk snakes are beloved by many farmers, as the snakes eat many of the pests that ruin their crops. Milk snakes have a few natural predators, including coyotes, foxes, hawks, owls, skunks and raccoons.