



Snake,

By Bryn Nelson
STAFF WRITER

The first act opens with a hiss.

The flattened neck, the tensed body, the menacing air of a cobra ready to strike. Or perhaps the drama begins with a rattle — the disquieting stir of dry leaves and twitching tail of a cornered rattlesnake.

Either way, the faked death scene in the finale would make any opera diva flush with pride.

The Eastern hognose snake, a harmless impersonator living amid the dunes and barrens of Long Island, uses its flair for theater to ward off the raccoons and hawks and foxes that would otherwise kill it for food. But as the great pretender finds itself in an increasingly suburban theater, the snake's choreographed scenes of defiance and death may be foreshadowing its most dramatic performance of all: a disappearing act.

"For all intents and purposes, hognose snakes could be gone from Long Island in the next 10 or 20 years if the current trend continues," warns Jeremy Feinberg, a herpetologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service based at Brookhaven National Laboratory. New York State's dwindling hognose snake population has merited an official status of special concern, but plummeting numbers on Long Island have alarmed researchers even more, some of whom believe the snake to be among the Island's most threatened reptiles.

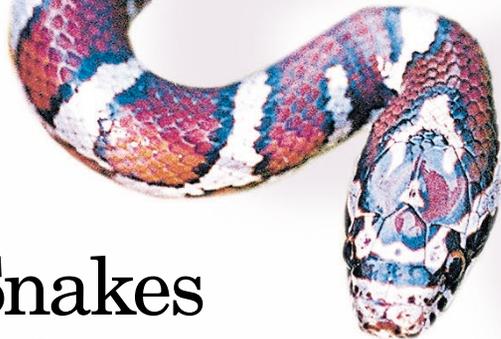
It wasn't always this way. In the summer of 1908, a naturalist wrote of seeing so many hognose hatchlings at Rockaway Beach that "their tracks made a hieroglyphic network among the hollows of smooth sand." Campers on the beach had captured more than 100 of the young in a barrel of water, believing them to be aquatic. Most drowned.

The land-loving hognose snake reaches 2 to 3 feet in length and ranges in

A milk snake found at the Gateway National Recreation Area in Queens.



Newsday Photo / Bill Davis



Snakes Of Long Island

New York State is home to 17 species of snakes. Long Island has 13 of them. Most common on Long Island are the garter snake and the water snake. Garter snakes are found many places, including woods, marshes and backyards. Water snakes are found in and near al-

most any water or wetland.

Snakes play critical roles in the food chain. A single rat snake can consume more than 100 rodents a year. Northern black racers eat lizards, birds, bird eggs, small mammals (including rodents) and small frogs. The very small worm snake eats mostly ants and termites. Snakes, in turn, are eaten by animals such as hawks and foxes.

None of Long Island's snakes are dangerous to humans. The Eastern hognose snake, with rear fangs, is slightly venomous, but harmless to people. Rattlesnakes have been gone from Long Island since the early 1900s.

Northern Brown Snake

Storeria dekayi
Fairly common
Dark brown to light tan
9 to 13¾ inches

In mild weather, active during day; when hot, active at night.

Northern Water Snake

Nerodia sipedon
Fairly common near water
Reddish-brown to grayish-brown
22 to 44 inches
Saliva prevents clotting, so bites may cause profuse bleeding.

Common Garter Snake

Thamnophis sirtalis ssp.
Common
Variable, with black stripes
18 to 51 inches
Can release an unpleasant musk odor when threatened.

Eastern Garter Snake

Thamnophis sirtalis sirtalis
Common