



Rattle and Roll Over

The hognose, known for its menacing cobra and rattlesnake acts, as well as its fake death scenes, is being edged off the Island's stage

color from black to olive to reddish-brown, with dark spots. It is readily identified by its upturned snout, which it uses like a shovel to burrow for its favored prey, the Fowler's toad. The stout-bodied snake is immune to toad poison and its rear fangs can puncture and deflate any toad that puffs up with air to avoid being swallowed.

When the hunter becomes the hunted, however, the real show begins. Unfortunately, the desperate con artist may be a victim of its own talents in the backyards of frightened suburbanites.

"It looks like a cobra for all the world, and people just naturally go for the rake or the shovel," says Al Breisch, a herpetologist for the state Department of Environmental Conservation in Albany. "I have people who have brought in hognose snakes that they have beaten to a pulp because they were absolutely convinced that it was a venomous snake."

It's a bitter irony for a creature that specializes in playing dead. In its climactic role, the snake pretends to writhe in pain and flops over onto its back, Feinberg says, "opening its mouth wide and letting its tongue hang out as if it had just been squished."

With its belly up and tongue lolling, the snake waits for the danger to pass, but patient observers can catch it opening an eye to sneak a peek. And after every attempt to right it, the snake insists on flipping over again. "It's almost so instinctual that it becomes morose after a while," Feinberg says. "It keeps pretending to die."

Researchers throughout Long Island began noting a real die-off by the late 1960s. Nevertheless, a pet store owner from New Paltz, N.Y., once told Feinberg the snakes were still plentiful enough in the 1970s that he and other dealers would routinely catch them in the grasslands around the newly built Nassau Coliseum.

In the early 1980s, conservationists launched a program to capture hognose snakes from areas slated for devel-



Photo by Tim Green

This Eastern hognose snake, with its mouth open, plays dead to fool predators. The hognose is in danger of disappearing from Long Island.

opment and reintroduce them to the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. But, for unknown reasons, the reintroduction failed to produce a sustainable population.

More bad news arrived when a 10-year statewide census ending in

1999 logged 140 reports of hognose snake sightings, but only three from Queens and 14 from Long Island. Few have materialized since.

Conservationists are tight-lipped about the exact locations of the sparse sightings — mostly on the South Fork

— out of fear that specific descriptions will encourage collectors hoping to own a rarity or make some money from their catch.

"Literally, taking a couple of individuals out of a population may have a significant impact at this point," Feinberg says.

A few new sightings may be cause for hope. Tim Green, the natural resources manager for Brookhaven National Laboratory, tallied five hognose snakes on the lab's sprawling campus last summer, all in or near one of the more protected locations on Long Island.

On a cloudy afternoon in April, Green and Feinberg drive through the habitat — a 290-acre parcel of pitch pines, sandy grasslands, and ephemeral ponds surrounded by a raised earthen ring that houses a physics installation known as a relativistic heavy ion collider. Green pauses by an 8-acre wetland formed by seasonal overflow from the Peconic River, a natural oasis amid the trappings of technology.

"This is probably the reason we have hognose up here," he says. The ponds promise the presence of toads. And with pine trees for cover and sandy grassland for basking, the cloistered habitat suggests something close to hognose heaven.

Feinberg checks under a few plywood coverboards laid nearby to entice the snakes. Nothing stirs beneath them.

But it's early in the season. Perhaps this scrubland stage and other scattered venues across the Island will once again feature a summer of mock cobras. Of phony rattlesnakes. Of illusory death. Each one a performance to remember.

HOGNOSE'S LAIR. Take a virtual tour of a hognose snake's habitat at Brookhaven National Laboratory, and join Nature Dad as he visits local nature sites. See www.linature.com on the Internet.



Olive to brown, black, with three yellow stripes
18 to 25½ inches
Will bite people.

Ribbon Snake

Thamnophis sauritus ssp.
Uncommon
Black or brown with yellow stripes
18½ to 40 inches
Likes to bask on rocks, stone walls, hedges and decks.

Eastern Ribbon Snake

Thamnophis sauritus sauritus
Uncommon
Dark red to brown with yellow stripes
17¾ to 26 inches
Good swimmer but will not enter deep water.

Milk Snake

Lampropeltis triangulum
Fairly common
Gray or tan with reddish-brown or brown spots
23⅝ to 35½ inches
Welcome on farms, where it eats rodents.

Worm Snake

Carphophis amoenus
Uncommon
Brown to black, resembles an earthworm
7½ and 11 inches
Secretive, almost never seen in the open.

Northern Black Racer

Coluber constrictor
Fairly common



Newsday Photo / Bill Davis

A brown snake at Gateway National Recreation Area

Black with white chin and throat
36 to 67 inches
Largest and fastest snake on the Island.

Smooth Green Snake

Liochlorophis vernalis
Uncommon
Green on back, and white on the underbelly
11¾ to 19¾ inches
Hibernate together in large numbers.

Eastern Hognose Snake

Heterodon platirhinos
Fairly uncommon
Highly variable, colors include red, orange, olive, yellow, brown or gray.
2 to 3 feet

When threatened, it spreads and flattens its head, inflates its body and hisses.

Northern Ringneck Snake

Diadophis punctatus
Uncommon
Slate gray to black with bright yellow to red on its underside.
9¼ to 15¾ inches
Releases musk and intestinal contents when threatened.

Northern Redbelly Snake

Storeria occipitomaculata
Very rare
Gray-brown, gray or black
6 to 8¼ inches
Curls upper lip when frightened.

COMPILED BY JULIE CLAIRE DIOP

SOURCES: Russell Burke of Hofstra University; State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry