

In My Backyard

Texas Blind Snake

Living Shoelace



Sanderson and Marathon are wild places. Most people in those West Texas communities live very close to the edge of town, which in these two places is only a block or so away. So, basically, I have lived in the desert for most of my life, even though technically I have lived in a populated place. Tell the bugs and snakes and other critters that bit of knowledge...they don't know human boundaries and often trespass in our safe little world.

The first time I ran into a Texas Blind Snake was at my home in Marathon before we moved to Sanderson. I was coming home one evening from work and saw what I thought was an earthworm crawling very rapidly across my front step. I thought, "Wow..I've never seen an earthworm move that fast!" Of course, speed is a relative term, but this guy was hooking it, twice

April, 2020 © CW (Bill) Smith



Blind Snake female with eggs

as fast as a normal earthworm. I bent over to get a better look and discovered it was not an earthworm, but a tiny pink snake with a dark head, squirming across the hot concrete. For all intents and purposes it looked like a pink shoelace with a dark aglet (the hardened end of a shoelace.) It quickly moved over the surface and dropped over the edge of the step, disappearing into the weeds. Several other times I saw one at Marathon, and at least one time at Sanderson.

The Texas Blind Snake, aka, *Leptotyphlops dulcis*, is a timid fellow and one of only three described species of blind snakes found in our area, and they are all actually subspecies of *L. dulcis*. Wikipedia says our little buddy has several common names, including burrowing snake, eastern worm snake, plains blind snake, Texas blind snake, Texas Rena, Texas slender blind snake, Texas thread snake, Texas worm snake, and worm snake. The two subspecies we will likely encounter are *L. d. dissectus*, the New Mexico blind snake and *L. d. dulcis*, the Plains or Texas blind snake. A third subspecies, *L. d. myopicus*, is found exclusively in Mexico. There is a movement to treat each subspecies as its own species, due to differences in their genetic makeup. There are about 112 described species of blind snakes in the US today, and probably many more. They are secretive and stay underground for most of the time, except when moisture level of the soil gets too high and they come out for air.

Besides the shiny pink scales, they have two tiny black eyespots which mainly distinguish between light and dark. The mouth is tiny and incapable of biting a human. The lower jaw is set back, giving them a pronounced overbite. The tail is blunt, giving it a very un-earthworm appearance, but



Blind Snake consuming a termite, tail first, and discarding the head.

otherwise it is about the size of an earthworm. Adults can grow up to about 11 inches in length.

Blind snakes stay buried in loose soil for most of the time, coming out when the moisture level gets too high (after a rain) or at night to feed. They mainly eat termites and ant larvae, so they are beneficial to humans and should not be killed or molested.

Although they have predators, including centipedes, snakes, birds, and mammals such as moles, armadillos, skunks, and domestic cats and are harmed by fire ants, they also work with other animals in a commensalistic relationship, both benefitting the other. Eastern Screech Owls capture blind snakes and take them alive back to their nests to help rid the nest of parasites.

Blind snakes can be found across the Southwestern U.S., from southwestern Kansas and Oklahoma down into central and south Texas and northern Mexico, and west to New Mexico and Arizona.

Blind snakes usually mate from spring to early summer. The female lays one to six eggs with the normal number of offspring being four. The eggs are oblong ovals about 3/4" by 1/4" in size. The female guards the eggs and the hatchlings. The male disappears after mating with the female.

Extremely dry periods and high temperatures drive blind snakes deep underground where they go into a period of torpor or inactivity until better con-



ditions arise. The blind snakes also move deep underground for hibernation during the winter. They are nocturnal for the most part, only coming to the surface in daylight on cool or rainy days.

Because their eyesight is limited, they communicate using chemicals exuded from their bodies. They also emit a chemical that drives ants and termites away, giving them free access to nests to forage for larvae and eggs. Other chemicals serve as attractants to male and female blind snakes in the mating process. Besides emitting chemicals, they are able to detect the chemicals deposited by ants when making trails to forage sources. By detecting the trail, blind snakes are able to go back to the source to harvest eggs and larvae.

Finally, Texas Blind Snakes are not endangered, but overuse of pesticides and destruction of their habitat is the biggest threat to their wellbeing. In Kansas they are in protected status and may soon be added to other state lists.

Since Texas Blind Snakes are not dangerous and perform a very beneficial service to humans, we should be respectful of their place in our ecological niche and let them go unmolested. If you must, catch and release, my friends, catch and release. With so many dangers in our modern world, we need all the friends we can get.

And, what's in your backyard?