

GOPHER SNAKE

(Species: *Pituophis melanoleucus*; Family Colubridae)

OTHER NAMES: Bull snake; Pine snake

DESCRIPTION: Some of the largest snakes in the US, 3-8 feet in length, 6 feet is more common. Ground color yellow or cream with black, brown or reddish-brown dorsal blotches. Smaller blotches on sides. Usually dark line across head in front of eyes and from behind eye to angle of jaw. Underside white to yellowish, often spotted with black. They are powerfully built with small heads. There are 15 subspecies of gopher snake in the US, including the Sonoran gopher snake found in Arizona (*Pituophis melanoleucus affinis*).



RANGE: Widespread across the U.S.; into southwestern Canada; south through Mexico into Guatemala; Baja California.

HABITAT: Deserts, prairie, brushland, woodland, open coniferous forests, farmlands. From sea level to about 9000 feet. Likes to burrow. It can climb trees.

BEHAVIOR: It is generally diurnal, but may be active at night during hot weather. They live under large rocks, logs or inside abandoned mammal and tortoise burrows. Gopher snakes are **nonvenomous** and completely harmless to humans.

NATURAL DIET: Mice, rats, gophers, squirrels, rabbits, birds and their eggs, insects, and lizards. They are noted for their high consumption of rodents. This snake kills its prey by means of constriction. In captivity they are fed every 10 to 14 days. They are fed dead mice/rats to prevent aggressiveness and to eliminate possible injury to snake from prey.

LIFE HISTORY: Mates in spring and has clutches of 3 to 24 eggs laid in June to August. Eggs are deposited in burrows, sandy soil or under large rocks and logs. The eggs usually hatch in 64-79 days. The young are born 12-18 inches in length.

INTERESTING FACTS: In defense, a gopher snake will behave as a rattlesnake by hissing loudly and flattening & triangulating its head. It will also beat the hard callis of its tail causing a shaking or vibrating sound. Sometimes they will even lunge at an intruder.

THREATS: Often killed because mistaken for rattlesnakes; frequently killed or injured when run over by automobiles; collected heavily as pets since they are not aggressive and are easily caught; they also suffer from poisons intended to kill rodents, especially in cultivated fields.

LIBERTY WILDLIFE EDUCATION GOPHER SNAKE

YANG: Donated to Liberty Wildlife in 2001 from Sierra Vista area. Thought to be approximately 3 years old at time of donation. Captive hatched and raised.

SNAKE HANDLING TIPS

Wash hands thoroughly before and after handling any snake (especially if you have been handling mice). If you are taking a Kingsnake to the same program, handle the Kingsnake first, wash your hands, and then collect the gopher snake.

Check food log before handling. Do not handle within 3-4 days of feeding.

Do not take if showing signs of shedding.

If enclosure is dirty, clean when back from program (wearing gloves) or ask a daily care volunteer to help. Snakes should always have water.

Transport in a clean pillowcase in a white bucket. Always tie off the neck of the pillow case or use one of the orange ratchet clips. Take a spare pillow case in case the snake defecates in the travel pillowcase.