

# ROSY BOA

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**SCIENTIFIC NAME:** *Lichanura trivirgata*. The genus is derived from the Greek roots *lichan* (forefinger) and *ura* (tail), a reference to the thick, blunt tail. The specific epithet is from the Latin *tri* (three) and *virgata* (stripes), referring to markings running the length of the body.

**DESCRIPTION:** Adults typically two to three feet long. Usually light cream or grayish with broad longitudinal stripes of rosy pink, rusty-brown or chocolate: one down the middle of the back and one on each side. Ventral (belly) scales small (as in all boas) compared to those of most other snakes. Scales on back and sides of body smooth, shiny and rather small. Eyes small, with vertical pupils (contrary to popular belief, not all snakes with vertical pupils are venomous). Head small, barely wider than neck. Tail heavy, with rounded tip, typical of smaller boas worldwide, including the rubber boa (primarily a Great Basin animal), the only other true boa native to the United States.

**HABITAT:** In Arizona, usually associated with upland desert vegetation and interior chaparral, sometimes extending into juniper woodlands. Most live in or near rock outcrops or boulder fields of mountain slopes and canyons. May occasionally follow riparian corridors or washes into lower desert flats.

**DISTRIBUTION:** Desert and coastal mountain ranges throughout Mohave and Sonoran deserts of southern California, western Arizona, Sonora and Baja California. Elevational range from sea level to about 4500 feet.

**BIOLOGY:** Snakes evolved from the extinct group of lizards that gave rise to Gila monsters and monitor lizards. Boas and pythons (collectively, boids) are among the most primitive snakes; they retain more characteristics of that ances-



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tral lizard group than most other snakes. For example, boids, including rosy boas, have external spurs on either side of the vent that are the vestiges of hind legs. These spurs are associated with tiny leg and pelvic bones, remnants completely lost in nearly all other snake lineages. Such primitive characteristics are ghosts of an animal's evolutionary history, and help biologists discern the phylogenetic relationships (similar to a family tree) among different groups.

Rosy boas are active foragers, quietly slithering through crevices and rodent burrows in search of small mammals. Though usually terrestrial, they sometimes climb trees in pursuit of birds. Prey are killed by constriction. The snake strikes, bites and coils around its quarry in one quick, fluid motion. Coils immobilize the prey, pinning its limbs and making it difficult to bite, scratch or otherwise defend or extricate itself. Each time the victim exhales, the snake tightens its hold and makes breathing more difficult, until the prey succumbs, usually within a minute or two. The snake then swallows its meal whole, head first.

Other than by secretive behavior, how do rosy boas defend themselves? It is very difficult to provoke one to bite, even in self defense. When molested, they roll

into a tight ball, head protected within the coils, blunt tail exposed. Mistaking the tail for the boa's head, the oppressor focuses its assault there, and often receives a mouthful of foul exudate from the snake's cloaca. The disgusted predator may then release the snake, allowing it to seek shelter without further injury.

**STATUS:** The rosy boa is not a listed or candidate species at a federal level, or at the state level in Arizona. There have been no status studies in Arizona yet, but these attractive and docile snakes are subject to substantial collecting pressure from legal hobbyists and illegal commercial pet traders. Prime habitat is destroyed or severely degraded by collectors who dismantle outcrops one rock at a time, moving and breaking everything from small rock flakes to desk-sized boulders in their quest to uncover a boa hiding in a crevice. Conversely, collection of surface-active rosy boas (such as individuals crossing roads) leaves habitat undamaged and probably has little impact on populations. Possible threats also include highways and agricultural development, which may isolate populations in Arizona's desert mountain ranges.

**MANAGEMENT NEEDS:** Although Arizona prohibits the sale of native wildlife within this state, our regulations are not binding in other states. Unscrupulous collectors may take rosy boas under authority of a hunting license and export them to other states, where they enter the commercial pet trade. Rosy boa habitat, shared by many other kinds of wildlife, also needs legal protection. Although there does not appear to be immediate cause for concern that this species will be lost from Arizona's rich herpetofauna, until commercial exploitation is controlled we can expect these beautiful snakes to become more difficult to find as accessible habitat steadily disappears. ♣