

Sonoran Whipsnake

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Masticophis bilineatus* is a member of the largest snake family, Colubridae, which includes two-thirds of the extant snake species. *Masticophis* refers to the whiplike form of the body and braided appearance of the tail scales (Greek *mastix*, whip; *ophis*, serpent), and *bilineatus* refers to the dark two-stripped parallel pattern on the back and sides (Latin *bi*, two; *lineatus*, lined).

DESCRIPTION: The Sonoran whipsnake is a slender-bodied, smooth-scaled snake that grows to more than 6 feet long. From the snout back, its dorsal coloration is slate blue to dark bluish-green, becoming yellowish-green or olive toward mid-body and fading to pearl gray toward the tail. Paired dark stripes appear on the anterior third to half of the body. Its belly is cream-colored, grading to pale yellow toward the tail. It has large brown eyes in which the round pupil is framed by a yellow border.

DISTRIBUTION: Sonoran whipsnakes are found from Colima, Mexico, north through the Mexican states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Sinaloa, Durango, Chihuahua and Sonora into extreme southwestern New Mexico and central Arizona, usually below 7,500 feet elevation. In Arizona, Sonoran whipsnakes occur in west-central Arizona south and east across the central portion of the state below the Mogollon Rim at elevations ranging from 1,960 to nearly 6,900 feet.

HABITAT: Sonoran whipsnakes are habitat generalists. They inhabit areas with rocky outcrops, low trees, steep rocky hillsides adjacent to streams, and moderate ground cover composed of grass and a mixture of rocks, litter and shrubs. In Arizona, they are found in desertscrub, grasslands, conifer and evergreen woodlands and low-elevation Sonoran riparian

deciduous forests. These whipsnakes are considered a mountain form in Arizona and are rarely observed in sparsely vegetated valleys.

BIOLOGY: Sonoran whipsnakes are almost entirely diurnal. In Arizona, individuals have been observed during every month except February, with most observations in April through September. They are semi-arboreal to arboreal (living in trees) and are most commonly observed in brush and trees such as whitethorn and catclaw acacia, desert hackberry and foothill paloverde.

Sonoran whipsnakes are widely foraging predators that search for and pursue prey in vegetation, within burrows and on the ground. They feed primarily on lizards and birds, although snakes, small mammals and frogs also have been reported. Field observations indicate this species grasps prey on the side, compressing the prey in its powerful jaws until it is subdued. Then it works its jaws toward the head to ingest prey headfirst.

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Sonoran whipsnakes are difficult to capture. Once captured, they usually strike repeatedly. If they obtain a grip with their teeth, they form a loop with their neck and give a vigorous jerk, resulting in the tearing of flesh rather than clean punctures.

Sonoran whipsnakes lay eggs, producing a clutch of 4–15 eggs from June through July. Young are identical to adults in coloration, measure about 17 inches long and hatch from August to October.

STATUS: Sonoran whipsnakes appear to be common members of Arizona's reptile fauna. Due to habitat, food preference and overall large geographic range, Arizona's population of Sonoran whipsnakes appears to be stable. This species can be found in suitable environs throughout the state.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Sonoran whipsnakes are best managed by ensuring habitat remains intact and undisturbed. They should be watched for in suitable habitat, as they may turn up in previously undocumented areas. Potential threats are any land use that removes potential shelter sites or compromises the prey base. 🦋

■ Turtles Project coordinator Cristina Jones specializes in native turtles, but always takes the time to appreciate snakes.

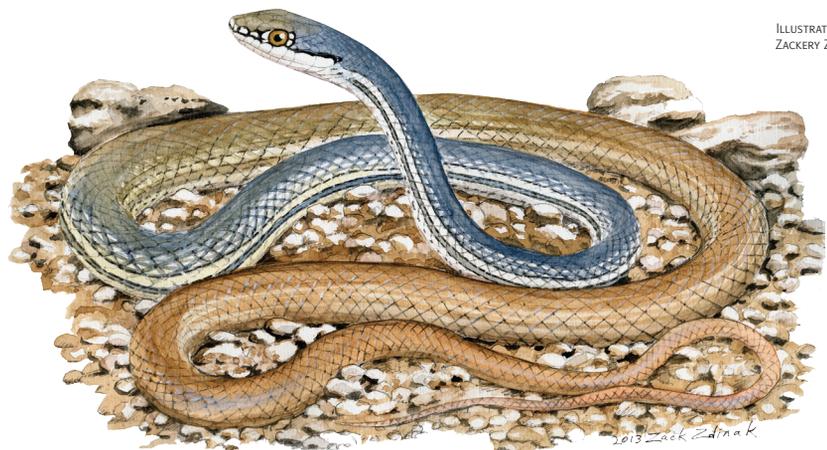


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