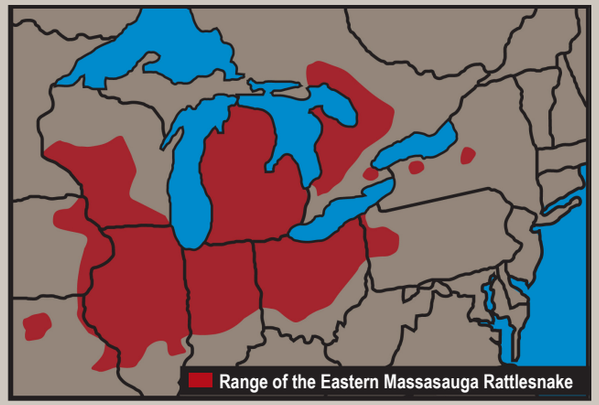
What's so special about the massasauga?

The rare eastern massasauga is northern Indiana's only native rattlesnake.

Because eastern massasaugas are shy and secretive, you may never see one in the wild. These snakes hide under brush and retreat to a sheltered area if spotted in the open.

Although eastern massasaugas are venomous, they usually flee from humans rather than bite. Their venom is toxic, but only a small amount is injected through short fangs. The last human fatality from an eastern massasauga bite occurred more than 60 years ago.

Eastern massasaugas play an important role in the ecosystem by feeding on mice, voles, and shrews, thus helping to keep the rodent population under control.



Why are they endangered?

Eastern massasaugas are endangered over much of their range because their wetland habitats are often drained and filled for development. These snakes are also collected for the illegal reptile trade. People may kill massasaugas out of fear, not realizing the snakes' importance to the ecosystem.

Nicholas Scobel

Eastern massasaugas live in northern Indiana's swamps, bogs, and wetlands.

Christopher Smith

People and snakes can live together.

Understanding snakes is the first step.

Learn to identify eastern massasaugas and other Indiana snakes. A field guide to native reptiles can help.

Wear proper footwear when hiking in areas where snakes might be found, especially at night. Stay on trails.

Limit the use of pesticides and other chemicals on natural areas on your property. All wildlife will benefit.

Teach your family and friends about snakes and what to do if they see an eastern massasauga.

Realize that all creatures play an important role in nature.

This brochure produced and distributed by:
Fort Wayne Children's Zoo
3411 Sherman Blvd.
Fort Wayne, IN 46808
260.427.6800

fort wayne children's ZOO
kidszoo.org

Cover photo by Christopher Smith

Northern Indiana's Endangered Rattlesnake

The Eastern Massasauga

Michael Jeffords

If you see an eastern massasauga...

Eastern massasaugas prefer wild wetlands, bogs, and swamps, so it is unlikely you'll see one in your backyard. But if you do encounter a massasauga, keep in mind the following:

Remain calm. The snake is more afraid of you than you are of it. Most likely, the snake will turn and flee into the shelter of a brushy area within a few minutes.

Always photograph snakes from a safe distance.

Do not try to capture or kill the snake. Simply make a note of the location, date, and time of sighting.

Call the Fort Wayne Children's Zoo at 260.427.6800 or e-mail mark@kidszoo.org to share information on your sighting. Your first-hand account can help with our conservation efforts.

Remember! Eastern massasaugas are protected by Indiana law. It is illegal to capture, harm, or kill them. Watch and enjoy them from a safe distance and let them be.

For more information, go to:
IPFW Center for Reptile and Amphibian Conservation & Management *herpcenter.ipfw.edu*

Canadian Eastern Massasauga Recovery Team
massasauga.ca

You can help!

You can help protect eastern massasaugas and other native animals.

If you know someone with wetlands on their property, encourage them to protect this valuable habitat.

Support local organizations working to protect wetlands and endangered species.

Contact local officials to support laws that protect wetlands.

Look for the eagle on your Indiana income tax form to donate money to the Indiana Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Diversity Section, which supports nongame and endangered wildlife, or visit in.gov/dnr/fishwild/.

Massasaugas typically hide in brush.
Always observe them from a safe distance.

Nicholas Scobel

Look-Alikes

Other native snakes look similar to eastern massasaugas, but they are non-venomous. All play an important role in the ecosystem.

Canadian Eastern Massasauga Recovery Team (3)

Frequently Asked Questions

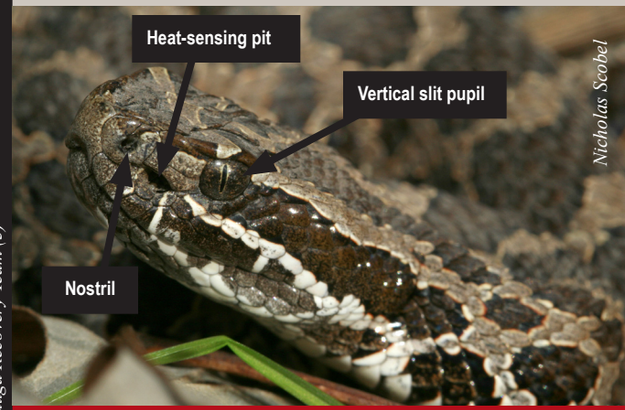
How can I tell if a snake is an eastern massasauga?
Many snake species look very similar to the eastern massasauga (see photos at left). Massasaugas have a rattle on the tip of a blunt tail (unless it has been broken off); eyes with a dark, vertical slit pupil; and a heat sensing pit between the eyes and nostrils.

How dangerous is the eastern massasauga?
Massasaugas have toxic venom, but they inject only a small amount during a defensive bite. Fatalities are rare but can occur.

Do people always die from rattlesnake bites?
No. With prompt medical attention, most venomous snake bites are successfully treated.

What should I do if I am bitten by an eastern massasauga?
Don't panic! Have someone take you to the nearest hospital immediately. Do not drive yourself unless there is no alternative. Use your phone to get assistance. Try to move as little as possible to slow the spread of venom.

Don't cut the wound or apply ice. Never place a tourniquet on the affected limb. Remember that eastern massasauga bites are rarely fatal. Remain calm and get professional help.



Nicholas Scobel

How did the massasauga get its name?

Massasauga **is the Chippewa word for 'great river mouth,' which describes the location where the snake originally was found – in marshes along the great rivers of the Midwest.**