



Fact Zone

Get The Facts!

Western Gopher Snake (Genus *Pituophis*)

Fact Sheet

The Western gopher is a member of the Colubrid family whose members represent the most widespread snakes found in North America. This family contains about two-thirds of all snake species on earth and is found on every continent. "Colubrid" tends to be a blanket term for snakes that haven't so far been classified into a natural group. The Western Gophers' vast range reaches from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans, up to southern Canada, down to Mexico and throughout all 4 deserts of the southwest. Gophers are often referred to as pinesnakes or bullsnakes.

Description: Adult gophers can grow to be 7 feet long but 4 feet is average. These heavy-bodied snakes have a background shade of yellow varying from tan to cream, upon which are light-brown, dark-brown or reddish large blotches that extend down its sides becoming smaller, to an underbelly of creamy-yellow, sometimes with dark spots. The tail bears dark bands. A dark line runs across the face from eye-to-eye and beyond, down towards the angle of the jaw. The dorsal scales are keeled reducing to smooth on the sides. Males tend to be larger than females of the same age.

Habitat: Due to their vast range, gophers can survive in prairies, deserts, woodlands and open brushlands, coniferous forests and on cultivated land, from below sea level to elevations beyond 8,000 feet and can tolerate sandy, rocky and overgrown terrain, but tend to avoid areas of dense forestation.

Diet: Gophers happily consume rodents, small mammals including young rabbits, birds, lizards and even the young of other snakes, while juvenile gophers will take insects and baby mice and lizards. In common with other non-venomous colubrids, gophers kill by constriction leading to suffocation of their prey. These diurnal hunters will of necessity become nocturnal in extreme desert temperatures. Although predators themselves, gophers are preyed-upon by coyotes, foxes, hawks and other snakes.

Reproduction: Gophers mate in May and produce an average 12 eggs in June and July. These are laid in loose surface substrates of sand or moist soil and even in abandoned burrows. Eggs typically hatch in August and September releasing babies of about 12 inches long in shades of muted grey that remains until their first slough.

Behavior: Inactive gophers shelter in burrows and under stones and logs, and bask on paths and flat rocks. At higher elevations and in locations where the temperature dictates, gophers hibernate in burrows, sometimes sharing with other snake species, and in deep rock clefts. A threatened gopher's first response is to run, however it also has the ability to produce a convincing impression of a rattlesnake, designed to scare away a predator rather than launch an attack.