



Department of Planning and Natural Resources
Division of Fish and Wildlife
U.S.V.I. Animal Fact Sheet #04
Virgin Islands Worm Snake
Typhlops richardii



Classification

Kingdom	Animalia
Phylum	Chordata
Subphylum	Vertebrata
Class	Reptilia
Order	Squamata
Suborder	Ophidia (Serpentes)
Family	Typhlopidae
Genus	<i>Typhlops</i>
species	<i>richardii</i>

Identification Characteristics

◆ Tail Spine	Present
◆ Color distribution:	bicolor: Grey/Brown above and cream below
◆ Eyes	Greatly Reduced
◆ Head shape:	Rounded or Weakly pointed
◆ Body	Cylindrical

Description

The animals in the genus *Typhlops* are generally known as worm snakes. Many snakes of this genus inhabit the Greater Antilles, the Bahamas, and some of the Lesser Antilles. Their bodies are almost perfectly cylindrical, and their scales are small, smooth, and tightly set, all of these being adaptations to a subterranean existence. They lack the enlarged ventral scales seen in other snakes. They are grey or brown on the dorsal side and a creamy grey ventrally. Their eyes are reduced to tiny dark spots under the skin, an additional adaptation to their subterranean life, and they are only able to distinguish between light and dark. Their head is slightly flattened and round. The tail ends in a sharp point, which can inflict a startling but totally harmless prick on any hand that holds them. Like all snakes in the U.S. Virgin Islands, the worm snake is not venomous.

Distribution & Habitat

Worm snakes may be found throughout the Virgin Islands. On St. Thomas they are fairly common in moist areas. In St. Croix they have been found in drier areas. They have occasionally been seen on cement walkways and streets. They are commonly confused with worms and may be more common than the average gardener is aware.

The most obvious way to distinguish between the blind snake and a worm is to look for the grooves that encircle the worm's body. These are not present on the Worm snake. Worm snakes are smooth and cylindrically shaped with small scales, visible to those with very good eyesight. When threatened above ground the worm snake will coil up with its head protected by the coils and the tail exposed. It will lash out with its tail, which may have a white tip on the end. In contrast, worms will coil themselves into a sticky writhing ball.

Diet

In contrast to most other snakes, the worm snake doesn't feed on large prey. It is specialized to feed on ant or termite pupae, larvae, eggs, and occasionally adults. The worm snake lives closely associated with its prey, under termite mounds, rocks, and fallen logs, it "swims" easily into loose soil when its lair is disturbed. The snake feeds on the bodily fluids of termites and ants. The snake crushes the prey which releases the body juices into its mouth, which it swallows. The exoskeleton is regurgitated (spat up).

Reproduction

The worm snake lays soft shelled eggs like other reptiles. They are likely to deposit their eggs in protected areas, where the young will hatch and quickly be able to find food. The reproduction of the worm snake has not been studied. So we do not know the length of time it takes for the eggs to hatch, or the numbers of eggs laid. The reproductive biology of the VI worm snake is unknown.

Status in the VI

The ecology and general biology of worm snakes in the U.S. Virgin Islands is also unknown. The little we do know is from anecdotal evidence collected by individuals over the years. What we do know is that they are not very abundant because very few people have seen them. Those who have are mainly gardeners and farmers or others who spend time working with soil. There appear to be areas on the islands where the worm snakes are more common than others. These are more rural locations, where people have worked the land, particularly by hand. They may also be seen by homeowners with cats. The cats may bring these snakes into the house. Worm snakes are frequently confused with earthworms because they are similarly shaped and colored.

What you can do to HELP

1. Worm snakes are not venomous and are very valuable to us in the tropics. They eat soft bodied invertebrates (primarily termites) and other insects that we consider pests.
2. Worm snakes need to eat regularly, and unless they are fed termites or other small soft-bodied invertebrates they will die. They do not make good pets.
3. Reducing the amount of pesticides and chemicals we use to control pests will help the worm snakes.
4. Please, if possible let them take care of themselves. They have been doing their job for millions of years, and are a great benefit to us.
5. Remember it is illegal to, or attempt to; take, catch, possess, injure, harass, or kill any indigenous species. The only exceptions are for people holding valid permits from the Division of Fish and Wildlife
7. For more information on this and other animals in the Virgin Islands please visit our website at:

www.vifishandwildlife.com

Written by William Coles 2002.
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FOR MORE INFORMATION ON
OUR NATIVE ANIMALS CONTACT**

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