



Black Racer vs. Black Rat Snake



Racer

Smooth scales

Flat black (matte finish)

Body essentially rounded in cross-section

Belly usually plain gray, blue, or blackish. Usually small amount of white only under chin—specimens from Mtns. have more white on throat.

Adults usually solid black dorsally, rarely showing any trace of the blotched juvenile pattern.

Dorsal scales usually in 17 rows anteriorly and at mid-body and 15 rows just anterior to vent.

Upper labial scales usually black; lower labials may be black, gray, or white. Labial scales do not usually have obviously black borders along the sutures.

Shorter head; larger eyes.

Very nervous, high-strung, and fast-moving; usually retreats very quickly when approached, and does not allow close approach when encountered in the open.

Nearly always very defensive, striking wildly and biting repeatedly when cornered or handled. Makes a very poor captive; usually never becomes docile and often refuses food in captivity.

Swallows food alive or holds it down with a loop of its body, or drags it around and chews on it until it succumbs from trauma and blood loss; not a constrictor despite the species name.

Rat Snake

Weakly keeled scales

Shiny black (gloss finish)

Body shaped like a mailbox/loaf-of-bread/railroad tunnel in cross-section

Belly usually whitish and mottled or checkered with gray anteriorly and plain grayish or blackish posteriorly. Lots of white under chin and throat and on lips.

Adults usually show at least traces of the blotched juvenile pattern, especially when distended with food or eggs. Usually there are some dorsal scales tipped with white. Some individuals show trace of four dark longitudinal stripes.

Dorsal scales in 25-29 rows anteriorly and at mid-body, and 17-21 rows just anterior to vent.

Upper and lower labials are usually white, with black borders between the scale sutures (i.e., vertical black lines on lips).

Slightly longer and more pointed head; slightly smaller eyes.

Often laid-back, much slower-moving. Often lies still and kinks body in a curious fashion when approached (this behavior may cause it to resemble a crooked stick and look like a non-edible object to visually-oriented predators).

Individual temperament varies; some individuals bite readily; others are relatively docile. Usually will bite if cornered or harassed, but often may be handled gently without biting. Usually does very well in captivity (except active, attempts to climb always, and pushes cage tops with nose; many captives rub their noses raw; you can often tell a captive rat snake by its rubbed nose); most become docile with frequent handling; most feed very readily (very strong feeding response).

Kills active prey by constriction; a very powerful constrictor; difference in muscle tone is easily felt in rat snakes vs. racers.



Racer

Diet includes small mammals, birds (and eggs), snakes, lizards, frogs, and some large insects (e.g., caterpillars, cicadas). Eat mostly relatively small prey.

Climbs low shrubs and vines readily, but rarely ascends trees or enters buildings. Mostly terrestrial.



Juveniles



Rat Snake

Adults feed mostly on mammals and birds (and their eggs). Juveniles eat lizards and frogs (especially treefrogs), switching to birds and mammals as they become larger. Can take very large prey (adult gray squirrels, young rabbits, etc.).

Often arboreal. Climbs extremely well, and often lives in tree hollows. Often enters buildings. Can easily climb up tree trunks and other vertical surfaces.



Juveniles



Text and photos by Jeff Beane.