

Snake in the Basement?

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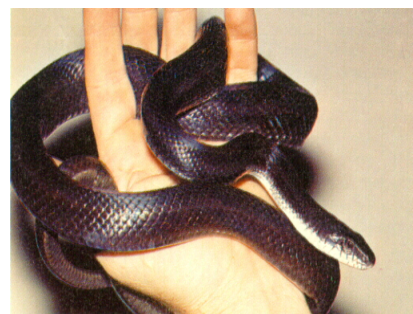
There are about 20 species of snakes found in Northern Virginia. Only a handful of these are commonly encountered, and the vast majority are harmless. Extension offices often receive specimens of snakes that have been found in the basement, garage, or other areas of the house or yard.



Juvenile black rat snakes are by far the most common species found in and around homes. They are harmless, though they are often misidentified as copperheads. The following pictures should help homeowners tell the two species apart.

Black rat snakes hatch in late summer and early fall. They are quite common in the fall until the weather gets cold. They are also common in spring. The young are 10-12 inches long with dark gray to black spots on a light gray background. Some individuals may vibrate their tails and strike aggressively. As many as 8-12 young may hatch from a clutch of eggs that was laid in a rotting log, a woodpile, or an old mulch pile.

Adult black rat snakes average 3-4 feet in length, but occasional specimens do grow larger. They do not turn black until they are about 2 feet long. Females lay eggs in late June and early July. They do not guard the eggs or young. Rat snakes feed on mice and other rodents, making them beneficial around barns and storage sheds. They are excellent climbers and will rob bird nests. Large snake skins found in attics and basements are usually from black rat snakes.



Copperheads are also born in late summer and early fall, but they are born alive. The young are 8-9 inches long. They have dark brown "hour-glass" shaped bands on a light brown or tan background. Newborns have a yellow tipped tail. They are born equipped with fangs and poison and can inflict a painful bite. Adults look just like the young, except they do not have the yellow tail. Adults average 2-3 feet in length. While the copperhead is found throughout Northern Virginia, it does have excellent camouflage, secretive habits, and is encountered much less often than the rat snake. Contrary to popular belief, the two species do not interbreed.

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