Master Naturalist Radio Segment – Herpetology on the Delmarva Peninsula: Pine snake

This is Erin Chapman of the Eastern Shore Virginia Master Naturalists bringing you the joys of herpetology on the Delmarva Peninsula. You might be familiar with the more common snakes such as the garter snake, eastern black rat snake, and northern black racer, but I bet you’ve never heard tales of the pine snake (*Pituophis melanoleucus*). For this segment, I will speak about the pine snake’s suspected presence on the shore.

The pine snake is a large sandy colored snake with black blotches scattered in a pattern along the body. Superficially, it can resemble a Timber rattlesnake to the untrained eye. They are in decline throughout their range and generally hard to find even in areas with known breeding populations, so finding one in the wild is kind of a big deal.

This species will likely very soon be listed as extirpated in the state of Virginia, and only one specimen has ever been collected on the Delmarva peninsula. The collected individual was found in a residential area in Kent County, Maryland in the early 2000s and is assumed to be an escaped pet. Unverified sightings of this species have been reported from Sussex County, Delaware and Wicomico and Worchester Counties, Maryland. These are more believable as they occurred in the snake’s preferred habitat – mixed pine-oak hardwood forests. However, without proper documentation their presence in these locations is only hear-say.

Habitat destruction due to urban expansion and commercial development is the reason for this snake’s decline. Rachel Carson back in 1963 identified habitat destruction as one of the three biggest threats to native species. Habitat destruction in this instance refers to fire suppression and agricultural and urban development.

The pine snake’s range is spotty the further north you travel from Florida, and they are very secretive in nature. It is speculated that some breeding populations might exist on the peninsula but have been overlooked due to the pine snake being active only during the warmer months and more than half that time they are in underground burrows. However, no evidence besides the correct habitat being present and unverified sightings exists to support this speculation.

The Pine snake has not been seen in Virginia for over 30 years. I’ve told various naturalists that if they find a pine snake in Virginia I would buy them a beer for every year it hasn’t been documented. To clarify – that’s craft beer. I received an email over the summer from some surveyors on the Mountain Valley Pipeline to let me know they were looking for the snake and were excited about the prize. Unfortunately for nature (but fortunately for my wallet) they did not find a pine snake. Hopefully, my challenge will get more people out in the correct habitat and produce a sighting.