



Photo: Dr. Richard King



What is the Lake Erie Water Snake?

Lake Erie Water Snake

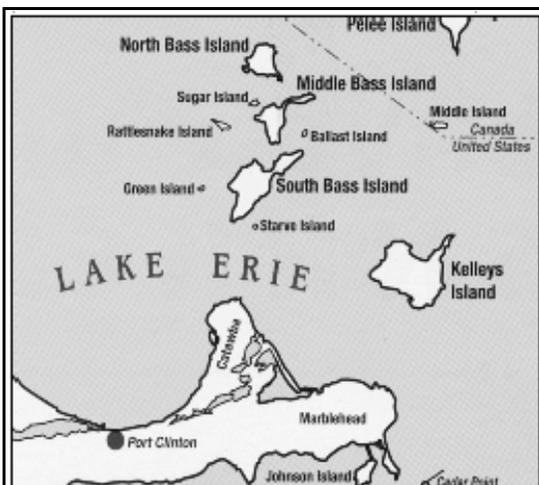
The Lake Erie water snake is a Federally threatened species. Threatened species are animals and plants that are likely to become endangered in the near future. Endangered species are animals and plants that are in danger of becoming extinct. The Lake Erie water snake is a subspecies which evolved from the Northern water snake. Western Lake Erie is the only place in the world where Lake Erie water snakes can be seen. Without the protection of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) given to island water snakes, this unique subspecies could disappear forever.

Scientific Name: *Nerodia sipedon insularum*

Appearance: The nonpoisonous Lake Erie water snake is a uniform gray or brown color, or it may have faded dark bands or blotches. It lacks the well-defined banding pattern found in its Northern water snake relatives. Mature snakes can range from 1 ½ to 3 feet in length.

Habitat and Range: Lake Erie water snakes live along rocky shorelines of limestone islands in western Lake Erie. The U.S. islands include South Bass, Middle Bass, North Bass, Sugar, Kelleys, Gibraltar, Rattlesnake, Starve, Ballast, Lost Ballast, and Gull. The Canadian islands include Pelee, Middle, East Sister, Hen, Chick, Big Chicken, and Little Chicken. Lake Erie water snakes also occur on the Catawba-Marblehead Peninsula in Ohio.

Life History: Lake Erie water snakes are born between mid-August and September. One female produces about 23 pencil-sized young. The snakes feed on small fish and amphibians. They spend time basking in the sun and hide from predators under large rocks and vegetation. The snakes are active from May through October. During the winter months they hibernate under rocks or other forms of shelter.



The Lake Erie water snake is found only in the western Lake Erie waters of Ohio and Canada.



Why has the Lake Erie water snake been listed as a Federally threatened species?

Population: The Lake Erie water snake has experienced major population declines during the past 150 years. There are an estimated 1,530 to 2,030 individuals remaining in the wild in the U.S. Most of the population decline can be attributed to habitat loss such as development of the snake's shoreline habitat. In addition, many snakes have been killed by humans who dislike the snakes or mistakenly believe that they are poisonous.

Status: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) listed the Lake Erie water snake as a Federally threatened species on August 30, 1999. This gives the snake and its habitat on the Lake Erie islands of Ohio federal protection against any form of "take," or harm, as defined by the ESA. The Service is currently developing a recovery plan for the snake. This plan will describe actions needed to help the water snake recover to a level where ESA protection would no longer be necessary.



What is being done to prevent the extinction of the Lake Erie water snake?

Research: The Service and the Ohio Division of Wildlife are funding a study of the snake and its life history on several Lake Erie islands. The study begins in the summer of 2000 and will last until 2002. The information gained from this study will help scientists understand how to best prevent the extinction of the water snake, and help the population return to historic levels.

Education: The Service and the Ohio Division of Wildlife are encouraging people to be stewards of their natural heritage by fostering a "live and let live" attitude toward the Lake Erie water snake. Public education for the residents sharing the islands with the snakes is helping to reduce persecution of the snake and preserve its habitat.

Habitat Protection: The snake's habitat is being protected by government agencies, island village officials, private organizations, and individuals dedicated to saving this unique snake subspecies.



What can I do to help prevent the extinction of species?

Learn: Learn more about the Lake Erie water snake and other endangered and threatened species. Understand how the destruction of habitat leads to loss of endangered and threatened species and loss of our nation's plant and animal diversity. Tell others about what you have learned.

Call or Write for More Information: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. For more information about the Lake Erie water snake and other threatened or endangered species, write to the Service at:

6950 Americana Parkway, Suite H,
Reynoldsburg, OH 43068-4127
(614) 469-6923

or visit the Fish and Wildlife Service's web page at:

<http://www.fws.gov/>