



## Vernon family finds rare snake in Vermont

By CHRIS GAROFOLO

VERNON -- A Vernon man and his children have reported the first Eastern hog-nosed snake in the Green Mountain State.

Dan Waters found the eight-inch recently hatched snake with his children and their friends at the end of his driveway on Sept. 23. The snake was playing dead at the time, a trick often used by the species when it feels threatened.

The children were getting off the bus when they all gathered around something near the drop-off point, said Waters. The snake was lying in the driveway upside-down, he said.

"It was nothing I've ever seen before," he added.

So the family scooped the creature into a box and brought it into the house.

Waters examined the snake and found it did not match any local species. He found online the best match to the specimen in his possession was an Eastern hog-nosed snake, but it was never documented in the state.

Unsure exactly how the species made its way to his Vernon home, he brought the snake to local game warden Kelly Price, who also recognized said it was unusual to the state.

"He agreed that it didn't look like anything around here," said Waters.

Price later contacted herpetologist Jim Andrews of the Vermont Reptile and Amphibian Atlas to look at

the snake.

According to Andrews, he has seen dozens of photographs sent in by residents thinking the snake they found was rare, but is typically nothing more than a milksnake or northern watersnake.

However, the suspicions from Waters and Price were correct this time around.

"In this case I was pleasantly surprised to see it was an Eastern hog-nosed snake, which has never been documented in this state before," he said.

"It was kind of cool, the kids were excited that they found something that hasn't been found before," said Waters.

A herpetologist studies a specific branch of zoology dealing with reptiles and amphibians. Andrews teaches a herpetology course at the University of Vermont and is known as the state's unofficial herpetologist.

Within two days of first contacting Price, Andrews and his assistant Kiley Briggs and former student Jason Plotkin visited Vernon to photograph the snake in greater detail and talked to the Waters family about where it was found.

There remains multiple theories on how the snake made its way to Vernon -- it may have transported itself or with its parent via railroad or truck in a cargo of mulch, compost, firewood or other materials from northern Massachusetts, but Waters said there has not been any such shipments to his knowledge.

The species is not popular as a pet snake because it is difficult to keep. The fact that it was a hatchling also means it is unlikely it was a released pet.

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Additionally, Andrews said it is possible small populations of the species have or do exist in scattered locations in Vermont with any documentation. Older reports of unknown snakes in southern counties may also could have been this snake, he added.

The Eastern hog-nosed snake ( *heterodon platirhinos* ), is commonly found 15 miles south of Vermont's border. Its appropriate habitat is along the Connecticut River's sandy points, but is seldom found north of Montague, Mass., with the exception of the Merrimack River valley in New Hampshire and the Glen Falls region of upstate New York.

Growing as large as 31 1/2 feet in length as adults (but are more noticeable because of their wide bodies), the Eastern hog-nosed snake prefers dry sandy soils and open space with plenty of sunshine. The species is harmless to humans, but may flare up like a cobra when cornered or roll on its back and play dead.

They tend to vary in coloration yet it is easily identified by its flat nose.

"What really sets this snake apart is the nose," said Andrews. "[The nose] is used for burrowing in the sand ... it is a toad specialist, it is a toad eater and will eat other amphibians but his favorite food is toads."

After the discovery of the snake, Andrews is asking residents living in the low borderlands in the southern portion of the state to keep their eyes open for a stocky little snake with a flat, upturned nose to see if the species is moving into Vermont.

"Some people have asked if the presence of this juvenile here represents a recent northern range expansion for its species. That is not known," said Andrews in a release. "At this point, the Eastern hog-

nosed snake will remain a hypothetical species in Vermont until others are found."

For more information or to contact Andrews, visit the state reptile and amphibian atlas Web site at [www.vtherpatlas.org](http://www.vtherpatlas.org) .

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