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Rare snake discovered in Vernon

By [Tom Mitchell](#) STAFF WRITER

VERNON – A resident's sighting of an unfamiliar reptile playing dead in his driveway has led to the first recorded sighting of an Eastern hog-nosed snake in the state.

"It is fortunate that someone has seen one ..." Mark Ferguson, a zoologist with the Vermont Nongame and Natural Heritage Program said this week. "... now we have a documented occurrence," he said of positive identification of the snake in a photo he has received.

The North American racer snake is another relatively newly discovered reptile, one that has been recorded within the past three years, Ferguson said.

Fowler's toad is another species seen in Vernon occasionally and is known to have an established population in the state since it could be coming across the Connecticut River, Ferguson said. If the Eastern hog-nosed snake is here, it feeds on American toads, he said.

In this case, Dan Waters of Vernon spotted what appeared to be a dead snake at the end of his driveway in late September, according to Jim Andrews, an adjunct professor of herpetology at University of Vermont, who said the snake was not actually dead, but only playing dead.

"Unknown to Dan at the time, it is a trick often used by the species he had in hand, a snake that had never previously been documented (in) Vermont."

Waters contacted state Game Warden Kelly Price, who went to the site and also recognized the snake as unusual. After taking pictures, he eventually released the snake near Waters home.

Discovery of this variety of hog-nosed snake has been particularly exciting for Andrews, coordinator of the Vermont Reptile and Amphibian Atlas, who has carefully tracked the sighting of the Eastern hog-nosed.

"It's just a baby hatched from an egg this year," about 8 inches in length, Andrews said. They will grow up to 3-1/2 feet in length, he said.

With this single sighting the presence of a population here is still hypothetical, Andrews said. "We wouldn't call it a local population until we get more sightings."

Andrews checked out whether the snake (or eggs it came from) may have been transported here by rail or in a wood delivery, but has found no logical explanation so far other than it was hatched here.

"People are going to be on the lookout for a short, fat snake that has a short snout," Andrews said. The flat upturned nose is a telltale field identifying mark of the thick-bodied, slow-moving snake, he said. "We are trying to prove it exists (here) and we are excited to have it."

The young age of the snake meant it probably wasn't a pet and generally this type is not as popular as a pet, he said. While some people do keep snakes as pets, Ferguson said he did not know of people keeping an Eastern hog-nose in Vermont.

Discoveries of new animals and/or plants, that are "new" in the sense that they are not already documented in Vermont, happen time to time, Ferguson said.

For some people keeping an eye for them, new species sightings can particularly exhilarating, he said. "Certainly a herpetologist would be jumping up and down," about this discovery Ferguson said. Herpetologists study the branch of zoology that deals with reptiles, including snakes and amphibians.

Nongame staff, meanwhile, will be working to document the whether the Eastern hog-nosed actually hibernates and reproduces in Vermont, as it has done with the North American racer (threatened in Vermont), Ferguson said.

Vernon climate is hospitable to the snake. "That corner of the state is a place where you can find some rare southern species," Andrews said. "It's a moderate lowland climate." The area is an extension of the Massachusetts-type floodplain habitat that reaches up into Vermont, Andrews said.

Beside Massachusetts, the Eastern hog-nosed snake live in the along the Merrimack in New Hampshire and around Queensbury, N.Y., Andrews said. As a result, the reptile has been on biologists' view screen as potentially being here, Ferguson said.

Checking a log of reports of other snakes for similar descriptions in other sightings, Andrews said the Eastern hog-nose may have also been seen but not positively identified in western Rutland County.

It's the only other area in the state that compares well to Vernon, since it is an area along Lake Champlain with moderate climate and sufficient rock cover where rattlesnakes, Eastern rat snakes, and five-lined skink lizards are found, Andrews said.

Andrews is asking that people in western Rutland County and the Vernon area keep their eyes open for the Eastern hog-nose and report it for recording in the atlas at vtherpatlas.org

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