

Campus Species Highlight

Western Yellow-Bellied Racer

General Overview:

The Western Yellow-bellied Racer, commonly referred to as the Racer, is a fast-moving, heat-tolerant, non-venomous snake found in the interior of British Columbia. These slender snakes are olive, greenish, or bluish-gray in color with a characteristic yellow underside, however, juveniles display distinctive patterns that fade as they mature. In the wild this species can be expected to live up to 15 years, and reach reproductive maturity at around 4 years old, oftenn laying a clutch of 3 to 12 eggs. Racers are agile predators, feeding on insects, small mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians. Though non-venomous and posing no threat to humans, they may strike in self-defense if approached.

Habitat

This species has been found on the UBCO campus and thrive in dry, open grasslands and mixed shrub habitats, often associated with Ponderosa pine, interior Douglas-fir, and other dry forest zones below 900 meters elevation. On the UBC Okanagan campus, they have been identified in areas featuring rocky slopes, which serve as crucial hibernacula (winter dens) and nesting sites. These sites are typically south-facing and may include natural features like rock crevices, mammal burrows, and logs, as well as anthropogenic structures like old wells and building foundations.



Conservation Status

The Racer is listed as a species of Special Concern under both the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) and the Species at Risk Act (SARA). Provincially, they are Blue-Listed (vulnerable) and classified as S3 by the Conservation Data Centre. Habitat loss and fragmentation, along

with their low population density, make them particularly susceptible to disturbances.

Ecological Importance

Racers play a key role in maintaining the balance of ecosystems by controlling insect and small vertebrate populations. Their presence supports biodiversity, and their habitats overlap with those of other species, often sharing hibernacula and nesting sites. Protecting the Racer not only ensures their survival but also supports the interconnected ecological web of grassland and forest ecosystems.

Conservation of their habitat on the UBC Okanagan campus, such as the preservation of Ponderosa pine woodlands, is essential to mitigate the impact of human activity and maintain ecological integrity.

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