

Making Ripples

by Amanda Bancroft

If you see a long green pencil eating spiders, it's probably a Northern Rough Greensnake, or grass snake. With adorable cartoon character eyes, beautiful green and yellow scales, and a tendency to jerk their heads back and forth, these snakes have crowd appeal. They're non-venomous, seldom bite, and never get bigger around than a pencil despite their long prehensile tails. Plus, they're abundant throughout Arkansas!

Like squirrels, they're arboreal, meaning they live in trees and bushes where they actively hunt prey and reproduce. We see them as road kill when they venture to the ground to bask in the sunlight on a gravel road. They eat almost exclusively insects, says Herps of Arkansas. "This species is a true insectivore, the only snake species in Arkansas that is." It'll consume spiders, caterpillars, snails and even tree frogs. To hunt and avoid detection by predators, it uses excellent camouflage and imitates the movement of stems in the breeze by swaying. Then it grabs and shakes its prey until it can be swallowed whole.

Breeding season occurs in spring, when the snakes emerge from hibernation and mate. But a female doesn't lay her eggs until summer, when she finds a safe hollow in a tree, rotting stump, or under a rock. They may also breed again in the fall. Females might use a communal nest with dozens of eggs being laid by multiple females, but each female lays between 2 and 14 eggs. Juvenile grass snakes resemble adults except that they're smaller and paler.

Northern rough green snakes have interesting habits and are gorgeous to admire. That and its docile nature are the main reasons why grass snakes are sold as pets. According to Reptiles Magazine, they're one of the most exploited North American snakes. "Rough green snakes are collected by the hundreds each year and wholesale for around eight dollars in U.S. currency making it a very accessible species to pet shops and later to the pet owner. It stresses easily and often fails to thrive after the long journey from nature to pet keeper," explains Leo Spinner.

So if you do see one that's actually alive, avoid the temptation to scoop it up and bring it home to live with you for the next possible 15 year lifespan (average lifespan is 8 years). Even though they aren't aggressive, they stress easily when handled. They will be happier and healthier living free in nature, but you can make your backyard enticing. They need hollow logs or trees to lay eggs, and lots of brush or shrubs hanging over a water source. If your yard is good for insects and amphibians, it'll be great for these cuties.

If you see one basking on the road in the morning sun, grab a branch with stems and gently, slowly carry the snake into the bushes. You'll give it a bit longer to live by saving its life, and get to enjoy another wild, beautiful part of our Natural State in the process!

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid cottage for land conservation on Kessler Mountain. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: www.RipplesBlog.org.