

Brown Water Snake

Nerodia taxispilota



The harmless brown water snake is a common resident of the southeastern U.S. Many people are absolutely convinced that this species is dangerous due to its large size and superficial resemblance to the venomous cottonmouth. These similarities often lead to a water snake's untimely (and unnecessary) death. Brown water snakes can be found in rivers, streams and even lakes and ponds. They feed almost exclusively on catfish, sometimes diving deep to the river bottom to secure their prey. They use long teeth to hold on to fish, swallowing them alive. They are, in turn, preyed upon by alligators, raptors (like hawks and owls), otters, raccoons and sometimes fish.

Savannah River Ecology Lab researcher, Mark Mills, has studied brown water snakes for more than five years. Mark and other SREL researchers capture water snakes by slipping out of a boat, swimming downstream with only the person's head above water, and then grasping snakes that are basking on limbs overhanging the water. This capture technique is not for the timid, because brown water snakes tend to bite very defensively when grabbed! After capture, individual snakes are measured, weighed, and marked using a PIT tag, which gives each specimen a unique number code. The codes can be read using a scanner similar to those used in stores to price merchandise.



Mark surgically implanted signaling devices (radiotransmitters) in a small number of snakes. By using radiotelemetry, he was able to locate these snakes from several hundred meters away, and thus follow their movements. He has found that some individual brown water snakes move great distances (sometimes 4-5 kilometers) along the Savannah River in search of food and mates.



*This information is provided by
Savannah River Ecology Laboratory
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*For more information,
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