

THE EASTERN COACHWHIP
MASTICOPHIS FLAGELLUM FLAGELLUM
(SHAW, 1802)

By: Pete Strimple, 5310 Sultana Drive, Cincinnati, OH 54238, U.S.A.

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HISTORICAL

The Eastern coachwhip was first described as *Coluber flagellum* by Shaw in 1802. The type locality was given as 'Carolina and Virginia'. It was later restricted to Charleston, South Carolina by Schmidt in 1953. The binominal, *Masticophis flagellum* was first published by Ortenburger in 1928. The generic name of *Masticophis*, is made up of two Greek words; mastix meaning whip, and ophis, meaning serpent. The specific name *flagellum* is Latin for whip. Currently there are seven subspecies of *Masticophis flagellum*.

DESCRIPTION

Adult Eastern coachwhips are generally bicolored, being dark brown or black for the anterior one-third to one-half of the body, fading to light brown or tan on the posterior portion of the body. In these specimens the venter is brown or black anteriorly, and tan to creamish posteriorly.

In some parts of the range, these snakes are almost uniformly black, with a reddish colored tail. Other specimens are a uniform tan color. The pale colored scales, on the posterior portion of most specimens, are edged in dark brown or black, giving the tail a 'braided' appearance, resembling a whip.

The head of the Eastern coachwhip, with its large eyes, is rather elongate and angular, but is distinct from the narrow neck. In most adult specimens, the head is unmarked, with the exception of occasional scattered light marks around the eyes and upper labials.

The smooth scales of *Masticophis flagellum flagellum* are in 17 rows at midbody, reduced to 13 just anterior to the vent. The anal plate is divided.

SIZE

Adult eastern coachwhips average between in total length. The record length so far recorded is one of cm. This maximum length makes *Masticophis flagellum flagellum* the second largest snake in the United States, the longest being the Eastern indigo snake *Drymarchon corais couperi*, with a maximum length of cm.

RANGE

The Eastern coachwhip is found in 15 states, from southeastern North Carolina, through South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, extreme southwestern Tennessee, southeastern and western Louisiana, Arkansas, southern Missouri, extreme southwestern Illinois, southeastern

Kansas, eastern Oklahoma, and eastern Texas. There are also isolated populations recorded from southcentral Kentucky, and northeastern Tennessee.

HABITAT

Within its range, Coachwhips are most common in dry, open areas including grassland prairies, sandy flatwoods, sandhills (with scrub oak and wire grass), open woodlands (on rocky hillsides and grassy fields), pine and palmetto flatwoods, longleaf pine-turkey oak, and around abandoned farms.

FOOD

Coachwhips eat a variety of food items including small rodents, birds and their eggs, lizards (including *Sceloporus*, *Cnemidophorus*, *Holbrookia* and *Urosaurus*), snakes, frogs, and insects. Prey is not constricted but swallowed alive.

HABITS

Masticophis flagellum flagellum are diurnal snakes and are occasionally active on hot days when other snakes may have found shelter from the heat. When prowling, coachwhips are often seen with their head and neck raised well above the ground searching the shrubs and low tree branches for lizards.

Eastern coachwhips tend to be somewhat aggressive, especially when cornered, and will bite quickly with a tearing motion that leaves lacerations rather than puncture wounds. If allowed to escape, coachwhips will proceed with a surprising burst of speed either across the ground or up into the nearest shrub or small tree.

REPRODUCTION

Eastern coachwhips typically breed in the spring (April, May) and lay their eggs in June or July. Females lay between 6-24 white, somewhat elongated eggs, that have a granular texture. The eggs hatch in August or September, occasionally in late July. The hatchling Coachwhips are cm in total length and look nothing like their parents. Juvenile *flagellum* have a tan, yellowish-brown, or pale brown ground color with narrow dark brown irregular crossbands that are one or two scale rows apart. These crossbands are most conspicuous on the neck and anterior half of the body, fading posteriorly. The ventral surface is white or creamish with two rows of dark spots on the anterior half. The head scales are marked with white around the edges. There is also white along the upper labials and around the eyes.

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