

THE GLOSSY SNAKE *ARIZONA ELEGANS*

By: Pete Strimple, 5310 Sultana Drive, Cincinnati, OH 45238, U.S.A.

Contents: Description - Range - Habitat - Food - Reproduction - Habits - Subspecies in the United States.

* * *

DESCRIPTION

The genus *Arizona* is a monotypic genus with its species being *Arizona elegans*. This species was first described by Kennicott in 1859. The type is actually two specimens (cotypes) collected at the lower 'Rio Grande', Texas, and 'Between Arkansas and Cimarron' River, Oklahoma. Later in 1950, Smith & Taylor restricted this rather broad locality to Eagle Pass, Maverick County, Texas.

Glossy snakes are moderately sized, averaging 2-3½ feet in total length. The maximum length attained by this species is 56 inches.

Snakes of the genus *Arizona* have a dorsal pattern comprised of 39-83 blotches that can be tan, brown, or greyish in color. These blotches are wider than long, and are edged in black. The ground color is more variable and can be straw, cream, light brown, yellowish-grey, pinkish or grey. The ventrum coloration is white, buff, or yellowish, and is unmarked (except in the California glossy snake). On each side of the head there is a dark postocular stripe that passes from the eye to the angle of the jaw. Frequently there is a lighter band crossing the head between the eyes.

Depending on the subspecies, the scale rows at mid-body range between 25-35. The dorsal scales in this species are smooth. Two of the more noticeable characteristics of this species are the pointed snout and the countersunk lower jaw. Another, less obvious characteristic is the obscurely elliptical pupil.

RANGE

Glossy snakes are found in the southwestern United States, northern Mexico, and northern Baja California. In the United States their range includes southern and southwestern California, southern Nevada, southern, western, and northeastern Arizona, New Mexico (except the west-central and north-central portions), extreme eastern Colorado, extreme southwest Nebraska, western and south-central Kansas, western Oklahoma, and northwest, western, and southern Texas.

In Mexico there are records of the following states; Aguascalientes, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Durango, Jalisco, Nuevo Leon, San Luis Potosi, Sinaloa, Sonora, Tamaulipas, and Zacatecas.

HABITAT

Glossy snakes are burrowing snakes, preferring dry, open, sandy or loose soiled areas. They can be found in barren deserts, brushy (mesquite and creosote) deserts, sagebrush flats, grasslands

and occasionally woodlands. They are generally found at elevations below 5,000 feet.

FOOD

The various subspecies of *Arizona elegans* feed upon lizards, snakes and small mammals. These snakes kill their prey by constriction.

REPRODUCTION

Breeding generally occurs from April through June, with eggs being laid in June or July. Females can lay between 3-23 eggs, the eggs being approximately 2 inches in length. The eggs usually hatch in August or September and the hatchlings are 8-11 inches in total length.

HABITS

Glossy snakes are primarily crepuscular or nocturnal throughout much of their range. In the eastern part of their range they are reported diurnal as well, especially during the cooler months. These snakes seem to be more tolerant of cooler temperatures than are many of the other desert species found within their range. They can also endure rather hot temperatures as well, as one study indicated that they could withstand temperatures of up to 42°C.

SUBSPECIES IN THE UNITED STATES

| | scale rows (mid-body) | number of dorsal blotches |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <i>Arizona elegans elegans</i> | 29-31 | 36-69 |
| <i>Arizona elegans arenicola</i> | 29-35 | 41-58 |
| <i>Arizona elegans candida</i> | 27 or fewer | 53-73 |
| <i>Arizona elegans eburnata</i> | 27 | 53-83 |
| <i>Arizona elegans noctivaga</i> | 25-29 | 50-75 |
| <i>Arizona elegans occidentalis</i> | 27 | 51-75 |
| <i>Arizona elegans philipi</i> | 27 | 53-80 |

N.B.: This article was published before in *The Forked Tongue*, 1986, Vol. 10 (10).