

Indigo Snakes are Beneficial and Harmless

by Jim Seeden

Years ago, while driving with friends to Laguna Atascosa Wildlife Refuge to see the whooping cranes, we noticed a thrashing in the grass beside the road. Stopping, we saw a large indigo snake with a rattlesnake's head in its mouth. We lingered long enough to watch it ingest a couple of feet of the rattlesnake's body and then continued on knowing we'd be safer anytime an indigo snake was around. Yes, indigo snakes eat rattlesnakes and have evolved a resistance to rattlesnake venom.



Just a few years ago, sitting in the shade beside my motorhome, I watched a large indigo emerge from the brush to take a drink from my ground-level birdbath. Noting, at one moment, where his head and tail were, I got a tape measure and determined that he was 8 feet long! His body had a few scars from past battles but I remember how unperturbed, unhurried and regal his movements seemed. His size and age indicated that he had little to fear.

Indigos are top predators and seem to know it.

Some weeks later, I watched as a 6 or 7 foot indigo easily climbed about 15 feet up into a large mesquite, slithered out along a long branch and devoured some roadrunner chicks in a nest while the parent birds fussed and pecked to no avail. I'm puzzled about how the indigo knew the baby birds were there and about how adept the snake was at tree climbing. Among the inhabitants of the Valley brush-land, the indigo snake is one I find both distinctive and of consequence in its environs.

Those found here are called Texas indigo snakes and are a subspecies. There's an Eastern indigo subspecies found in Florida. Indigos are our country's largest, non-venomous snakes. They're black but called indigo because in the right light they have a bluish sheen. The ventral side (bottom) is salmon colored.

Their range includes southern Texas and northern Mexico and they prefer brush-land and lightly wooded areas near a source of water.

As with other snakes, they're carnivores and eat small mammals, birds, lizards, frogs, and eggs. They shed their skin periodically as they grow. Active

during the day, they seek hiding places, such as abandoned animal dens, during very hot or cold times. Snakes are "cold blooded" which means they can't control their body temperature as we do.

They mate during the winter or early spring and lay 10 to 12 eggs. The hatchlings are up to 2 feet long.

Unfortunately, their numbers are declining and they're listed as threatened and protected by law. The decline is attributed to loss of habitat and road-kill. I wish we could do more to conserve them.

