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FEATURED

Snake Spotting

Wildlife Office Needs Help Spotting a Rainbow...Snake

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An adult Rainbow Snake

Photo Courtesy of JD Wilson and The NC Wildlife Resources Commission

The NC Wildlife Resources Commission recently announced it is looking for help from the public to report sightings of the rainbow snake, native to the Southeastern Coastal Plain and the Sandhills.

In recent years, biologists have increasingly used the public as a tool to track species that may be in decline or are uncommon to sight.

Wildlife Diversity Biologist and Herpetologist Aubrey Greene said the public has been a great help for past projects involving animal tracking, most recently in a project tracking soft shell turtles.

“We get a lot of really great responses, and people are just excited to share what they are actually seeing with these turtles, and I’m really hoping that the rainbow snake turns into the same.”

The snake has become increasingly rare as its population declines, in part due to the decline in its primary prey, the American eel. It can be identified by its three red stripes, glossy black scales and a hardened, pointed tip on its tail.

Greene said she has already seen a report entered with a picture of a snake eating an eel.

The reporting system is anonymous. Reporters have the option to leave their email address and let the Wildlife Commission reach out for more information about the sighting.

Eel populations are diminishing, in part, due to environmental impacts on waterways because its life cycle involves swimming upstream. If part of a river system is blocked off, the upper part may lose its eel population, impacting the greater biodiversity of the water system.

“They can be very large, five, six feet long. But they’re completely harmless, non-venomous and are big-bodied as they become adults,” Greene said.

Rainbow snakes are often found in and around waterways because the water houses a majority of their food sources. Younger snakes may feed on small frogs, salamanders, earthworms and small fish. Once mature, the snakes almost exclusively prey on eels, swallowing them alive and headfirst.

Historical records from the NC Wildlife Commission show the snake in Moore County around Powells Pond in Aberdeen and in upper parts of Little River.

Greene anticipates fishermen or outdoor enthusiasts to report the most sightings, as they are hard to spot outside of their normal environment and quite elusive.

“So my hope is that people who are fishing are also seeing these snakes and will then report them. They probably haven’t always realized that there was any significance to them other than it’s a beautiful species.”

If the snake population were to decline further, Greene worries about unexpected consequences.

“If you remove any piece of that puzzle, you run the risk of losing a function that we don’t know, or we don’t recognize. Right now, eels are declining, so I can’t say that eels would run rampant. That’s not what’s gonna happen if their predator goes away, but it doesn’t mean that something else wouldn’t be impacted.”

Reporting will help biologists track populations and possibly plan future monitoring. Find more information or report a sighting [here](#).

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