

# Dusky Pigmy Rattlesnake

*Sistrurus miliarius barbouri*



Three subspecies of pigmy rattlesnakes exist: the Carolina Pigmy Rattlesnake (*S. m. streckeri*), the Dusky Pigmy Rattlesnake (*S. m. barbouri*), and the Western Pigmy Rattlesnake (*S. m. streckeri*). Only the dusky occurs in Florida.

Pigmy rattlesnakes are aptly named because they are the smallest species of rattlesnake in the United States.

It is a small, 14–22 inch rattlesnake that belongs to the genus *Sistrurus*. Unlike the larger rattlesnakes of the genus *Crotalus*, this species has nine large scales on top of the head and a tiny rattle that is seldom heard. Pigmies are more like to warn predators by small, rapid side-to-side head twitches than by rattling.

They are usually dull gray with a row of dark spots running down the center of the back and along the sides. Sometimes there will be an orange stripe running the length of its back. The rattle is so small that its “buzz” sounds like a small insect. The young, like copperheads and cottonmouths, have yellow-tipped tails that they use to lure prey. The tail darkens as the snakes reach maturity.

Contrary to the commonly held belief that snakes grow throughout life, these snakes appear to do most of their growth in the first 2-3 years of life, after which growth slows appreciably, to less 1 cm per year. It appears that adult snakes allocate most of their energy to reproduction, not continued growth.

There are no differences in growth rates or body size between males and females.

Pigmy rattlesnakes spend most of their time well-hidden among leaf litter and can be very hard to spot. They can be found in lowland pine flatwoods, prairies, around lakes and ponds, and along the borders of many freshwater marshes and cypress swamps.

The habitat in which Dusky Pigmy Rattlesnakes are most frequently en-

countered, at least in southern Florida, is the edges of water running through marshes and prairies. One trait that all of these habitats must have in common is that they are all in close proximity to water. Pigmy rattlesnakes are good swimmers.

Like most pit vipers, they are ambush predators, staying coiled in a spot and waiting for prey to come to them. Individual snakes have been observed in the same location for as long as two to three weeks.

Pigmy rattlesnakes feed nearly exclusively on other herps, primarily anoles and several species of frog including tree frogs and leopard frogs. They will eat other prey including insects, centipedes, and small mammals.

There is quite a bit of variation in foraging postures and techniques used by individual snakes. Although the most frequent foraging location is coiled on the ground in some type of leaf litters, some snakes forage from positions elevated several inches to several feet above the ground on branches, fallen logs, or palm fronds.

At times, especially during flood periods, some snakes move as high as 8-12 feet up into palm trees or saplings. Some individuals are consistently found elevated on logs in a foraging coil with the body positioned at the side of a fallen log and the head oriented upwards towards the top of the log, presumably waiting for a prey animal to use the log as a runway. In grassy areas, pigmies typically position themselves at the edge of a small clearing in the grass, backed up to a grass clump, with their head orienting towards the middle of the opening.

Like other pit vipers, pigmies release their prey after the strike, and then scent-track the prey after it has died.

Pigmy rattlers can be active during the day or at night; however, they are so small and so well camouflaged that they are rarely seen. When disturbed, pigmy rattlers generally remain still and try to rely on their camouflage. If threatened and unable to escape, they will bite to defend themselves. The bite, while usually not life threatening, can be painful and result in the loss of a digit.

One male-female reproductive interaction is mate-guarding. The pair will stay in close proximity; possibly one coiled on top of the other for several days at a time. Mating most often occurs between September and January. Copulation can take several hours to complete. Once complete, the female stores sperm from her mate(s) until approximately the following April.

Pigmy Rattlesnakes give birth to 3 to 9 babies in late summer or early fall. As in many other snakes, larger females generally produce more offspring, but not bigger offspring. A newborn pigmy rattlesnake is an amazingly miniaturized animal. In Florida they average about 4-5 grams in weight, and when tightly coiled, they are barely larger in diameter than a quarter.

Litters of newborn pigmies normally remain tightly clustered within a few feet of their mother for several days after birth, until they complete their first shed. After shedding, they disperse to begin their mostly solitary lives. Though the mother is often quite near her babies, there is little to no active defense of the young.