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## A PSA for the EASTERN RAT SNAKE

The most common snake in Maryland is the Eastern Rat Snake. We all can easily recognize them. The adults range from 4-8 feet depending on age and they are shiny and black with a checkerboard pattern on the belly. Regardless of our personal fear of snakes, most people respect the rat snake as a useful predator of rodents and thankfully leave them alone. In addition to rodents, rat snakes also seek out lizards, birds and their eggs. A friend has even seen a large rat snake consume a squirrel.



Eastern rat snakes live throughout Maryland on farmlands, forested wetlands and backyards, including mine. Earlier this summer, I learned that a juvenile eastern rat snake looks very different from an adult. I was checking one of my bluebird houses and found a snake coiled in the nest. Certain it was a copperhead, I panicked and closed the birdhouse. I returned with my camera and sent the photo to a friend at DNR. "Don't kill it! It's

illegal to kill a juvenile ratnake!" I still can't find documentation that it's illegal, but I do like the role this snake plays in the eco-system and welcome them in my backyard habitat.

Last week I came across another surprise while working outdoors. This time I was not panicked at all and took this photo (see at right). Another juvenile rat snake graced my yard. Juveniles stay in the area where they hatched for at least two years. So, look out mice, my yard is a safety zone for these useful predators.

