



Klamath Network Featured Creature

August, 2013

Western Yellow-Bellied Racer (*Coluber constrictor mormon*)

General Description: The Western yellow-bellied racer (*Coluber constrictor mormon*) is a subspecies of Racer (*Coluber constrictor*). The racer is a slender snake with broad head, large eyes and slender neck. Adult western racers have smooth scales that are solid brown to olive green above, with a lighter off-white to yellow coloring below. Adults may appear grey-blue when nearing the shedding phase. Juvenile racers have brown saddle makings on the back and smaller brown makings down the side. Racers feed on insects, lizards, smaller snakes, frogs, toads, small mammals, birds, and their eggs. When hunting, racers commonly move with head held high, sometimes moving the head side to side to aid in depth perception.



A juvenile Western yellow-bellied racer

Image from: <http://www.californiaherps.com/snakes/pages/c.c.mormon.html>

Habitat: The racer can be found in meadows, grasslands, chaparral, juniper woodlands and sagebrush flats, but are absent from dense forests, high mountains, and very dry areas. Racers prefer open sunny habitats with rocks, logs and dense shrubs for protective cover.



Photo: Nicholas Hess

Ecology: The racer is a fast-moving diurnal (daylight) hunter. Prey is captured with great speed, crushed with its jaws, or pinned under coils, and swallowed alive. Racers can be aggressive when cornered and may bite when handled, but are non-venomous and considered harmless to humans. Most are good climbers and may climb shrubs or trees when hunting or being pursued. Racers are inactive during the winter, overwintering in communal dens which may be some distance from their summer range.

Reproduction: Racers are sexually mature at 2 to 3 years of age. Breeding takes place from April to June. Clutches of 3-7 eggs are deposited under debris, in rotten logs, or abandoned burrows, and hatch 6 to 9 weeks later.



Distribution: The species *Coluber constrictor*, is widespread throughout North and Central America, from British Colombia to Guatemala. The Western Yellow-bellied Racer subspecies is found throughout California, Oregon and Washington, parts of Idaho and Montana, Utah, and Western Colorado. Some isolated populations can be found in eastern Arizona and northwestern New Mexico.

Where to see in the Klamath

Parks: Western yellow-bellied racers can potentially be found in the all of the parks of the Klamath Network, but are not yet recorded at Oregon Caves NM.



Photo: John Worden

Interesting Fact: Due to the difference in appearance, juvenile racers were once thought to be a different species from the adults.

Resources and Further Reading:
<http://www.californiaherps.com/snakes/pages/c.c.mormon.html>

Csuti, B., Kimberling, A. J., O'Neil, T. A., Shaughnessy, M. M., Gaines, E. P., & Huso, M. M. P. (1997). *Atlas of Oregon Wildlife*. Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press.

Stebbins, R. C. (2003). *Western Reptile and Amphibians* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company.