



Coluber constrictor.

Meis Martin, del.

F.S. Duval, Lith. Phil.

COLUBER.—*Linnæus. Cuvier. Wagler.*

GENUS COLUBER.—CHARACTERS. Head elongated, distinct from the neck, and covered with plates above; snout rather rounded; eyes large, pupil round; two posterior orbital plates; loral plate single; body elongated, and ribs so articulated with the vertebræ that the animal cannot flatten itself during life; tail generally long, and always with bifid plates or scutellæ below.

REMARKS. To avoid the introduction of a useless genus, where the only difference between the animals that I have as yet observed, is in having scales slightly carinated, it will be necessary to arrange the Colubers in two sections—those with smooth scales, and those with scales slightly carinated.

I.—*Colubers with Smooth Scales.*COLUBER CONSTRICTOR.—*Linnæus.**Plate XI.*

CHARACTERS. Head oval, long; snout prolonged and rather pointed; body and tail long and slender; colour above, uniform bluish-black; abdomen slate-colour, tinged with blue; chin and throat silver-white, with occasional black spots. Pl. 176. Sc. 94.

SYNONYMES. Black Snake, *Catesby*, Carol., &c., vol. ii. p. 48, pl. xlviii.

Coluber constrictor, *Linnæus*, Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 385.

Black Snake, *Kalm*, Trav., Foster's Trans., vol. ii. p. 202.

- Black Snake, *Pennant*, *Arct. Zool. Suppl.*, p. 92.
Le Lien, *Lacépède*, *Hist. Nat. des Serp.*, tom. ii. p. 309.
Coluber constrictor, *Gmelin*, *Syst. Nat. Lin.*, tom. i. part iii. p. 1109.
Coluber constrictor, *Latreille*, *Hist. Nat. Rept.*, tom. iv. p. 178.
Coluber constrictor, *Daudin*, *Hist. Nat. des Rept.*, tom. vi. p. 402.
Coluber constrictor, *Shaw*, *Gen. Zool.*, vol. iii. part ii. p. 464.
Natrix constrictor, *Merrem*, *Versuch eines Syst. der Amphib.*, p. 108.
Coluber constrictor, *Fitzinger*, *Neue Class. der Rept.*, p. 57.
Coluber constrictor, *Harlan*, *Med. and Phys. Res.*, p. 112.
Black Snake, *Vulgo*.

DESCRIPTION. The head is elongated, oval, with the snout somewhat prolonged and rather pointed; the vertical plate is pentagonal, broader and rounded in front, narrower and with an acute angle behind. The superior orbital plates are long, very large, projecting, and quadrilateral in form, rather larger posteriorly; the occipital are also very large, irregularly pentagonal, broadest before, with three articulating facets for joining with the vertical, superior, and posterior orbital plates. The frontal are pentagonal, with their internal borders broadest, and narrower externally, where they pass in behind the nasal plates to the loreal, which is large and of square form; the anterior frontal are sub-round; the rostral is rather elongated and pointed anteriorly, and is very regularly triangular, with its basis down and its apex upwards. There are two nasal plates, of which the anterior is quadrilateral, and slightly concave behind; the posterior is nearly of the same size and form, but more semi-lunated or crescentic on its anterior margin, to accommodate the nostril. The anterior orbital plates are two in number, the inferior small, the superior very large, making a considerable portion of the front of the orbit, and then ascending between the frontal and superior orbital to the same horizontal plane as the frontal plate. There are two small posterior orbital plates, the upper is irregularly quadrilateral, the inferior is semi-lunated or crescentic. There are seven large irregularly quadrilateral labial plates on each side, increasing in size from the snout to the angle of the mouth, the third and fourth of which make the inferior wall of the orbit of the eye.

The nostrils are lateral, very large, near the snout, and open outwards and a little backwards. The eyes are large and bright; the pupil black, and the iris of the darkest grey. The neck is contracted.

The body is very long, slender, and covered with large, smooth, hexagonal scales above, and with broad plates below. The tail is also long and slender, and at times may be used as a prehensile instrument.

COLOUR. The whole superior surface of the Coluber constrictor is of beautiful bluish-black; the abdomen and tail are bluish-slate; while the chin and throat are pure silver-white, sometimes marked with a few black spots.

DIMENSIONS. Length of head, 1 inch 8 lines; length of body, 47 inches; length of tail, 16 inches: total length, 5 feet 3 inches 8 lines. In the specimen above described there were 176 broad abdominal plates, with a double one before the vent, and 94 bifid plates under the tail. Black Snakes are said at times far to exceed these dimensions; the longest I have ever seen was 6 feet 1 inch.

HABITS. The Coluber constrictor is an extremely active snake, climbing with facility, and running with great rapidity; whence it is not uncommonly called the "Racer." The Black Snake frequents shady places, covered with thick shrubs, on the margins of streams or ponds of water; though it often leaves these coverts and seeks the borders of old fields, or rocks, or even the way-side, to bask in the sun.

It feeds on mice, toads, &c., or on small birds; and, as it is an excellent climber, is frequently seen on trees in search of their nests. It is a bold and daring serpent, enters barns and out-houses without fear, and has been known to destroy young chickens. It is said to suffocate its prey, like the Boa constrictor, in its folds, which is at least doubtful; I have often seen it take its prey both in the native state and in confinement, which it always did by seizing it with the mouth.

In the breeding season it is extremely irascible, and will frequently attack persons passing at a distance of several steps; its tail then quivers with rage, making a quick vibratory motion, which in forests and among dry leaves sounds not unlike the Rattlesnake; it now elevates the head one or two feet from the ground, and darts upon its adversary; luckily its bite is harmless, and not more painful than the scratch of a pin.

It will even descend from trees to attack its enemy if teased, as I have more than once experienced when in search of reptiles; yet I have never seen it endeavour to twine itself around the legs, as is commonly supposed. Even in confinement it carries with it the same irascible temper, is easily provoked, quarrels with its fellow prisoners, and bites at whatever may be offered it.

The same power of charming its prey has been attributed to the Black, as to the Rattlesnake, and with still less appearance of reason; for this is a nimble animal, and can pursue his prey, while the Rattlesnake must lie in wait for his. It is remarkable that the birds most commonly found "charmed," according to Dr. Barton,* are the cat-bird (*Turdus Carolinensis*), or red-winged blackbird (*Icterus phœniceus*). These birds choose thick and shady places on the margins of streams for their residence, and generally build their nests on shrubs, as the alder, &c.; the latter bird not unfrequently takes the precaution to select such bushes as are on small islands, or such as have their roots surrounded by water, and thus her home is more secure. Now the Black Snake chooses precisely the same localities, knowing, probably, the haunts of its prey. The serpent begins the war by besieging the nest; the old bird, aware of its intention, attacks it with "fluttering and uncertain motions, accompanied by a plaintive cry of distress, and is then said to be charmed." The snake is at last either driven off, or it succeeds in its enterprise, captures the young, and not unfrequently the old bird is killed in the struggle and devoured; though the birds most commonly found in the stomach of the Black Snake are young, and frequently unfledged.

* Trans. Amer. Phil. Soc., vol. iv. p. 103.

Sometimes the old bird by her cries calls in the assistance of her neighbours, to drive away the aggressor. I have seen more than a dozen birds, thus engaged with a large Black Snake, that had probably just committed some depredation, but was now quietly stretched on a rock, basking in the sun; and it was not a little singular that birds of very different genera, and those seldom seen together, all united in this warfare against a common enemy, and finally compelled him to seek shelter among some low, thick shrubs, by the violence of their assault.

Another remark of Dr. Barton, on "fascination," is worthy of attentive observation; he says, "as far as he could learn after many inquiries, that the season of the year at which any particular species of bird has been seen under the influence of the fascinating power of a serpent, corresponds with the exact time of their '*incubation*' or rearing their young."

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION. The Coluber constrictor is found in nearly all parts of the United States, and may be regarded as the most common of our serpents. Kalm met with it as far north as latitude 43; thence it reaches to the shores of the Gulf of Mexico; nor is it confined to the Atlantic states, but abounds in the western country; Say found it even as high as Engineer Cantonment on the Missouri, and I have received specimens from Louisiana and Arkansas.

GENERAL REMARKS. Catesby first described the Black Snake, and accompanied his description with a very good figure. Kalm subsequently gave a long account of it in his travels, but he seems very credulous, and relates several absurd stories as to its habits. Linnæus, by some great oversight, in the tenth edition of his *Systema Naturæ*, confounded this animal with the *Heterodon simus*; which error, however, he corrected in his twelfth and last edition.



Holbrook, John Edwards. 1842. "Coluber constrictor – Linneaus." *North American herpetology; or, A description of the reptiles inhabiting the United States* 3, 55–59. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.326802>.

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