



Coluber eximius.

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COLUBER EXIMIUS.—*Dekay*.*Plate XV.*

CHARACTERS. Head rather short; snout rounded; body above milk-coloured, with a triple series of dark spots; vertebral range largest, and transversely oval; lateral series smaller, sub-round, with a lighter spot in the centre; abdomen silver-white, each plate marked with one or more quadrilateral black spots, so arranged as to give a tessellated appearance. Pl. 198. Sc. 47.

SYNONYMES. *Coluber eximius*, *Dekay*, manuscript.

Coluber eximius, *Harlan*, Med. and Phys. Res., p. 123.

Coluber calligaster, *Harlan*, Med. and Phys. Res., p. 122.

House Snake or Milk Snake, *Vulgo*.

DESCRIPTION. The head is rather short, with the snout rounded; the vertical plate is short, very large, nearly triangular, broad in front, and acute angled behind, with two facets for joining with the occipital plates, which makes it obscurely pentagonal; the superior orbital plate is large, irregularly quadrilateral, broadest behind and slightly projecting; the occipital plates are large, very broad and pentagonal; there are two temporals, quadrilateral, of which the upper is smaller; the frontal plates are hexagonal and large, with their internal margins broadest, and the external reaching between the anterior orbital and posterior nasal to a square loreal plate; the anterior frontal are quadrilateral and broadest externally; the rostral plate is short, thick, and rounded in front and above, and concave below; there are two nasal plates, the anterior quadrilateral, incurvated behind; the posterior is elongated, sub-hexagonal, and joined behind to a small, quadrilateral, loreal plate, situated in front of the anterior orbital, which is single

and very large; there are two posterior orbital, of quadrilateral form and nearly of equal size; there are seven labial on each side, quadrilateral, and increasing in size from the rostral plate to the angle of the mouth; of these, the third and fourth make the inferior wall of the orbit of the eye.

The nostrils are large, near the snout and lateral, but open a little upwards. The eyes are large, with the pupil dusky, and the iris pale grey. The neck is contracted.

The body is elongated, but tolerably robust, and covered with smooth, rather small, hexagonal scales above, and with broad plates below. The tail is rather short, thick at its root, but soon becomes cylindrical and smaller, ending in a horny tip.

COLOUR. The *Coluber eximius* resembles much the *Coluber guttatus* in the disposition of its colours, though it varies greatly from it in its tints; the ground colour of the whole superior surface of the animal is a shining milky-white, often with a reddish tinge; the anterior part of the head is marked with a few not very distinct dusky spots, and has a well marked transverse dusky band reaching from the anterior extremity of one superior orbital plate to the other, and occupying about half the posterior part of the frontal plates; another line, smaller, but of similar colour, descends backwards to the angle of the mouth; the crown of the head, as well as its occipital region and neck, is occupied by a large dusky blotch, with a small white spot near its anterior border, and a larger one, elongated, resembling somewhat the letter V in its centre; this dark blotch is so arranged as to leave before it a transverse white bar, which includes the two posterior thirds of the superior orbital plates, from the posterior part of which descends on each side over the temples a lateral line of similar colour to behind the angle of the mouth. The upper lip is milky-white, with the posterior part of each plate margined with dusky.

The body above is milky-white, often tinged with red; along the vertebral line

is a series of ovoid dusky blotches, sometimes with irregular margins, and always bordered with black, and most extensive in the transverse direction, in which it differs from the *Coluber guttatus*. These blotches are sometimes so extensive that they give the serpent an appearance of being banded with black and white; alternating with these dusky bars on the flanks is a second series of sub-round spots, smaller and blacker than those of the back. There is often a third series lower down and still smaller.

The abdomen is silver-white, each plate being marked with one or two black spots; if there is a single spot on the plate, it is oblong, quadrilateral, large, and placed near the centre; when there are two spots, they are regularly quadrilateral, and are situated near the lateral extremities of the plate. These spots give to the whole inferior surface of the animal a beautiful tessellated appearance of black and white; which well merits the name of *calligaster*, that Harlan says was given by Say to the western variety of this animal.

DIMENSIONS. Length of head, 11 lines; length of body, 30 inches; length of tail, 5½ inches; total length, 36 inches 5 lines. In the specimen here described there were 198 abdominal plates, and 47 sub-caudal scales. This animal is said at times to exceed 4 feet in length.

HABITS. The *Coluber eximius* is gentle in its habits, feeding on field-mice, various insects, &c. It approaches without fear the habitations of men, and is hence not uncommonly called the House Snake; it also frequents dairies and cellars where milk is kept; and this, from a mistaken notion of its robbing the dairy-women, has given rise to another name, "Milk Snake."

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION. The range of the *Coluber eximius* seems to be confined to the northward of the 37th parallel of latitude; south of this, in the Atlantic states, I have never heard of its existence; its place is there supplied by another and closely allied species, the *Coluber guttatus*. North of this line it is however abundant; I have seen it in Maine and Rhode Island; Dr. Storer in

Massachusetts; Dr. Dekay in New York; Dr. Hallowell in Pennsylvania; Dr. Geddings in Maryland. West of the Alleghanies the *Coluber eximius* was observed by Dr. Pickering in Illinois, and by Say high up the Missouri; how far south it may run down the valley of the Mississippi, I have at this moment no means of determining; but it may be remarked that reptiles are there much less confined in their geographical range than they are in the Atlantic states.

GENERAL REMARKS. The *Coluber eximius*, though so common in the northern states, was only a short time since recognised and described as a distinct species by Dr. Dekay, an excellent herpetologist, and one who has done much in ophidiology. Say seemed to consider the serpent he observed in Missouri as new; but I am not aware that he described it as such. Dr. Harlan, however, gave a description of it from specimens in the Philadelphia Museum, and under the name *calligaster*, from the beautiful arrangement of colours on the belly. I have examined these specimens, and can pronounce them identical with the *Coluber eximius*, having a few plates more.

The general resemblance between the *Coluber eximius* and the *Coluber guttatus*, is so great as to lead several excellent naturalists to consider them identical; yet there are many differences, which, though small if taken alone, when combined are sufficient to establish these animals as separate and distinct species. To give a better notion of their differences, I have had the two animals drawn nearly in the same position.

1. The head of the *Coluber eximius* is shorter and more rounded in front.
2. The body is shorter in proportion, and the tail much more so, and is thicker, and the number of the abdominal plates and bifid sub-caudal plates do not agree.
3. The disposition as well as the tint of the colour is entirely different in life; but when the two animals have been kept in alcohol, then the colours become more alike.

4. They differ in habits; the *Coluber guttatus* selects old fields and dry places, while the *Coluber eximius* prefers rocky or shady spots for his abode.

5. They differ also much in their geographical distribution; the one being peculiar to the south, the other as much so to the north.



Holbrook, John Edwards. 1842. "Coluber eximius – Dekay." *North American herpetology; or, A description of the reptiles inhabiting the United States* 3, 69–73.
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