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# NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

## Rubber Boa

*CHARINA BOTTAE*



By Kris Mohoruk

### Characteristics

The rubber boa is one of the smaller members of the boa family. Adults are found to be anywhere from 38 to 84 cm long, with newborns typically being between 19 and 23 centimeters. They get their name from their wrinkled looking skin and body shape – which makes them look almost rubber like. They are typically tan to dark brown, with a lighter olive-green or yellow underside. For their body size, rubber boas have very small eyes and short blunt heads that are generally no wider than their body.

One of the signature features of the rubber boa is its short blunt tail, and is often described as looking very similar to its head, giving it the nickname “the two headed snake”.

### Life Cycle

Rubber boa mating happens shortly after hibernation in the spring. Once breeding has happened, the young will develop inside the female boa’s body. Once the young have completely developed, they are born live (known as ovoviviparous), with the female usually giving birth to anywhere between 1 and 8 newborns.

Rubber boas are able to give birth every year, however maybe due to their sluggish nature they usually only reproduce every four years or so.

## Habitat

British Columbia is the most northern limit of the rubber boa's range in North America, with its range extending from the Vancouver area all the way past Cranbrook. Rubber boas are quite flexible and can be found in varying habitat types like grasslands, meadows, deciduous and conifer forests, and even in high alpine settings. They generally do not like warmer temperatures like other snakes, but can live in areas that are very cold. Rubber boas can also be found under rocks, logs, leaf litter and burrows.

## Behaviour

Rubber boas have some very distinct behaviors that make them very different compared to their other slithering counterparts. An example of these behaviors is when rubber boas are threatened by predators; they will often curl into a ball, bury their head, and expose their tail to mimic their head. They will then try and jab their tail as if it were to make it look like the snake was striking. If the predator is still persistent, the rubber boas will release a smelly musk from their vent as a last ditch effort to fend off the predator.

Another use that the rubber boa has for its tail is using it as a distraction during feeding. For example, if the rubber boa were to predate a litter of mice, it will often use its tail as a way to distract mom while it quickly eats the young. In many cases, the rubber boa over time will have a fair amount of scar tissue on its tail region for using this ploy.

While rubber boas do like the cold, they don't like when it gets too frosty out. When winter time rolls around, rubber boas will end up hibernating underground in fall and re-emerge in April.

## Threats

Like with other snake species, rubber boas are often killed by cars when basking along the road in the evening. Another large impact to the rubber boa is loss of its precious habitat through urbanization and agriculture. Due to their mild mannered nature, rubber boas are often plucked right from the wild and placed into captivity by people looking for a pet. However, most boas that are taken from the wild usually die due to the specialized care that they require.

Due to their low reproductive rate and very patchy distribution, many of these small patches of rubber boas have very low genetic diversity. This means that future diseases and repeated breeding could cause a collapse of the entire population.

Natural predators can include raccoon, fox, skunk and raptors.

## What We Can Do To Help

- Support initiatives to preserve and protect rubber boa habitat
- If you spot a rubber boa in the wild, you can report it to your local branch of the Ministry of the Environment (<http://www.bcreptiles.ca/reportsightings.htm>).
- If you find a rubber boa in the wild, keep your distance, take a photo, and let them be.

## Interesting Facts

- They are considered a primitive snake compared to their relatives native to Latin America
- Even though rubber boas are considered to be sluggish, they are very adaptable and are very good climbers, burrowers and swimmers.
- They have well established populations around Pemberton BC, Williams Lake BC, and Radium Hot Springs BC.
- During hunting, rubber boas are able to keep their heads a few degrees higher than their body temperature while hunting on cool nights.
- Rubber boas in the wild have been recorded of living up to 30 years!

## Bibliography

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