

Bullsnakes.

These photos are of a Bullsnake on Snake River Farm. Bullsnakes are commonly called Gopher Snakes because gophers are their primary food.

Bullsnakes are listed as, "Status: Special Concern, Species in Greatest Conservation Need".

They are however, relatively common in our sandy pastures. I saw four while working a 30-acre area.

The snake in these photos was the largest. It was close to 8 feet long.

Two others were about six feet and the fourth was seven.

They are well camouflaged with patterns and colors ranging from black to yellow to reddish.

I came across the snakes while leveling pocket gopher mounds with a small tractor and harrow.

It was a mostly sunny day in mid-April. The snakes were just waking from winter and warming their bodies in the sunshine.

Pocket gophers prefer well vegetated sand. Sand is easy burrowing and the plants provide the roots and tubers that the gophers eat.

Our good pastures provide the ideal habitat for pocket gophers.

Pocket gophers provide the right habitat for gopher snakes.

In the first photo, the snake is on top of a gopher mound. I irritated the snake while getting in the right position for photographing. When pressed, Bullsnakes coil, hiss and strike. It did that. That is all a bluff, however. Bullsnakes are not poisonous.

After a couple minutes, it slithered into the pocket gopher tunnels where it lives and hunts.

Most people try to eradicate pocket gophers from fields and lawns. Pocket gophers make mounds that can certainly damage the appearance of a lawn. In a pasture the mounds can also smother plants. The worst effect can be the uneven terrain and bumps that the mounds create.

On the positive side, they bring subsoil to the surface. That has a positive mixing effect for nutrients. Of course, pocket gophers also provide food for other creatures, especially Bullsnakes.

I do not try to eradicate pocket gophers. I try to keep the gophers in check with the help of Bullsnakes. I think it is working.

The mounds do make the pastures bumpy. Those of you who have been on horse-drawn wagon rides at our farm know how that feels.

To minimize the bumps, I pull a small harrow over the fresh mounds early each spring. The third photo is of the small tractor and harrow that I use for that leveling. The harrow spreads the subsoil dirt that the gophers have mounded. It also unburies many of the plants.

The Bullsnake's habitat is centered on the gopher colonies. I watch closely for them from the tractor seat. Snakes are slow movers this early in the year. Once I spot one it is easy to avoid.

Best regards. Tom









The Bullsnake is the largest species of snake in Minnesota. This snake ranges from three to 6 feet in length. The longest recorded Bullsnake was over 8 feet long.

Status: Special Concern, Species in Greatest Conservation Need

Size: 37 - 72 inches

Active season: Late April through early October

Scales: Keeled, single anal plate

Description: This snake is large and stout-bodied. Its head is heavily marked with black or near black markings, including a dark stripe from the eye to the corner of the mouth. The lips have distinct vertical black or near black bars. This snake's coloration is unusual in that it looks like three distinct patterns. The tail is typically yellow or golden brown with dark rings, and the snake's midsection contains black to reddish brown blotches. Coloration becomes more mottled with black and white as you move towards the head, where the blotch pattern becomes less distinct. The belly is pale yellow with square or rectangular dark spots.

Diet: Primarily rodents, but also birds, bird eggs, frogs

Habitat: Occur in sand prairies, bluff prairies, oak savannas, oak barrens, and pastures. They overwinter below the frost line in small mammal burrows or rock crevices, often with other snake species.

Hunting: Constrictor, primarily diurnal in spring and fall, nocturnal in summer

Reproduction: Egg layer, clutch size is 2 -