



# The Wilder Side of Oakland County

by Jonathan Schechter

## Meet the Eastern Hognose Snake

I've been a fan of snakes ever since I was little kid running barefoot in rural Connecticut catching bugs, beetles and garter snakes that lived in a meadow near our old shed. I'm still a fan of all species of snakes including our rarely seen Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake. But the snake species that really draws my attention and fascinates me is the Eastern Hognose Snake, one of the least seen and most misunderstood of all snake species that live in Oakland County. The name hognose comes from its burrowing habit. The upturned snout helps the snake dig burrows in sandy soil.

Last week a gentlemen contacted me about an encounter not far from me in a sandy area near Big Fish Lake at the Ortonville State Recreation Area. Someone else recently posted a photo of one to Facebook but did not share the location beyond saying it was in Oakland County. Those two encounters inspired me to share thoughts and photos of our rather fascinating Eastern Hognose Snakes.

Perhaps you will be lucky and see one too; a snake species that is deserving of the best actor award and poses no threat; unless you are a toad. If you are toad, the eastern hognose might be the last thing you will ever see.

There are pockets of excellent habitat for Eastern Hognose Snakes in Oakland County but the chance of seeing one is rare unless you happen to be in the right place at the right time. I have yet to stumble upon one locally in all my trekking adventures however I am reasonably sure that hognose snakes have seen me. Perhaps they have seen you as well.

Hognose snakes have no interest in humans and I'll emphasize they are not aggressive and their very mild venom is used to subdue their primary prey; the American Toad. Their fangs "pop" and deflate toads that may puff up to look bigger. I've never had one bite during the many times I have handled them but I have had them defecate and expel a foul-smelling musk when handled; which obviously encouraged me to let it go.

As for the photos at right, I captured all the images on South Manitou Island while I was volunteer as a lighthouse keeper for Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. The habitat on that federally protected Lake Michigan island is ideal for them and toads are plentiful. I would see them almost every sunny day and had the pleasure of one living under the old house in which I stayed. The hognose snakes and I remained good neighbors and I would sometimes bring their presence to the attention of nature-loving visitors to the island.

South Manitou has perfect conditions for their survival. They are often spotted in the village area of the island and I remember well the day a very hefty one was sunning in front of the visitor center and was causing quite a stir. I assured the growing crowd of visitors it was not a cobra and not venomous. I picked it up and moved it about 100 feet away for its protection.

If a best actor award was available for snakes, the eastern hognose would win hands down. They can flare their neck like a cobra and hiss and if that doesn't work it's time to play dead. They will roll over, loll their tongue out, convulse a few times and play dead.

If you want to see one in Oakland County it will most likely be an exciting accidental encounter. I chatted with herpetologist Jim Harding a few years ago about their habitat and presence in Oakland County and he shared his thoughts: "I think hognose snakes are doing reasonably well in a few spots in the northern lower peninsula, plus the southwest and along the sandy area and dune woodlands of the west coast of Michigan. They are very rare in Southeast Michigan."

*Oakland County Parks staffer Jonathan Schechter is an avid "nature-embracing" hiker who follows phenology - the study of natural cycles of nature's way - to inspire his blogs.*

