

Explore the Watershed Rubber Boas

A rubber boa, *Charina bottae*, was recently spotted in Joaquin Miller Park by FOSC volunteers on a seed hike. Volunteers Hilary Powers and Camille Nowell and Nursery and Restoration Manager Jay Cassianni were out collecting seeds for the native plant nursery when they came across the snake, the smallest member of the boa family.



The rubber boa is one of only two boa species native to the U.S. The boa's genus, *Charina*, is derived from the Greek word χαριτωμένος (charitoménos), which means graceful. Don't be alarmed to learn that boas live in your neighborhood! These small, friendly nonvenomous snakes are much more likely to curl lightly around your wrist than to squeeze the life out of you. Rubber boas can be found throughout the West, in Utah, Wyoming, Montana, Nevada, California, Oregon, Washington and southern British Columbia.

Rubber boas can be found in a variety of ecosystem types, including forests, woodlands and grasslands ranging from sea level up to 9,200 feet in altitude.

They are adept swimmers and climbers but are generally slow movers. Rubber boas tend to be most active in early spring and late fall, using the months from October to March to hibernate with their fellow boas. Due to their notable tolerance of cold temperatures, they are among the first snakes in their range to emerge from hibernation. Their body temperatures can be as low as 54 degrees. The colder temperatures make for slower movement, which is less likely to attract the attention of predators—hawks, coyotes, raccoons and skunks. Their tails somewhat resemble their heads as a decoy defense mechanism. Rubber boas also can release a potent musky smell as a defense mechanism to ward off potential predators.

Rubber boas prefer to be active and hunt during twilight and nighttime hours; they tend to prefer cooler temperatures, which they seek out by burrowing and by dwelling beneath rocks, leaf litter, and logs. Rubber boas suffocate their prey just like their larger constrictor cousins. They are known for feeding on newborn rodents from mice to bats, and insectivores such as shrews. They

have also been observed to prey on bird hatchlings, amphibians and the eggs of other reptiles, even [rattlesnakes](#).

Like most boa species, rubber boas are ovoviviparous. This means that they hatch the eggs containing their young inside their bodies. They produce broods of two to eight live young in the late summer or fall every few years. The baby rubber boa is immediately self-sufficient and does not need to feed for up to a year. Rubber boas can long lives, with accounts noting a life span range of 20 to 50 years.

Scientists and researchers have been working to understand the speciation of rubber boas through genetics. The southern rubber boa, a rarely seen species found in southern California, is currently being studied to determine its status and conservation needs. The southern rubber boa is listed by the State of California as threatened and is a Forest Service Region 5 Sensitive Species. Further research will determine if the snake's rarity is due to difficulties in sighting (due to their preference for night-time activity and dwelling underground), or if they are eligible for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

If you see a rubber boa in the watershed, snap a picture and tag Friends of Sausal Creek on Instagram or iNaturalist!



Photos by Camille Nowell
Article by Jackie Van Der Hout

Sources:

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