

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

BABY SNAKES

During the past few weeks, I've been contacted by many Victoria Park residents who have seen small snakes around their yards, porches, along roads, and even in their homes. Some folks have identified the snakes as pygmy rattlesnakes, others as water moccasins, and others as rat snakes. In every case which I was able to investigate, the snake turned out to be a baby black racer — Florida's most common snake. Late summer is the season when these reptiles hatch out from the eggs laid by adult females in late spring or early summer.

As an adult, the black racer is rather easy to identify — a long, lean, solid black body with white chin and neck. But as a newly-hatched baby and for the first several months of its life, a

racer doesn't resemble its parents at all. Its body is covered with reddish-brown blotches and there's not a bit of black (see photo). The pygmy rattlesnake (which I've never recorded in Victoria Park) also has blotches along its body but it's a much thicker snake with a large, triangular head. A racer's eyes are also much larger, with round pupils (it's not a good idea to get close enough to a suspected venomous snake to check its pupils!). And, true to its name, it's lightning-fast, unlike the lethargic pygmy rattlesnake.

These little racers feed mainly on small frogs, lizards (like the anoles that are abundant around our homes) and insects. After shedding their skin several times, within a year their bodies become black like their parents — and more easily recognized as our most common snake.