

**Catalogue of American Amphibians
and Reptiles 910**

Adams, C. S., J. B. Pierce, D. C. Rudolph,
W. A. Ryberg, and T. J. Hibbitts. 2017.
Pituophis ruthveni.

***Pituophis ruthveni* Stull
Louisiana Pinesnake**

Pituophis melanoleucus ruthveni Stull 1929:1.
Type-locality, "Long Leaf, Rapides Par-
ish, Louisiana, USA." Holotype, USNM
76278, adult male, collected by W. D. Har-
ris on 24 March 1927 (not examined by
authors).

Pituophis catenifer ruthveni Fugler 1955:24.
Pituophis ruthveni Conant 1956:28.

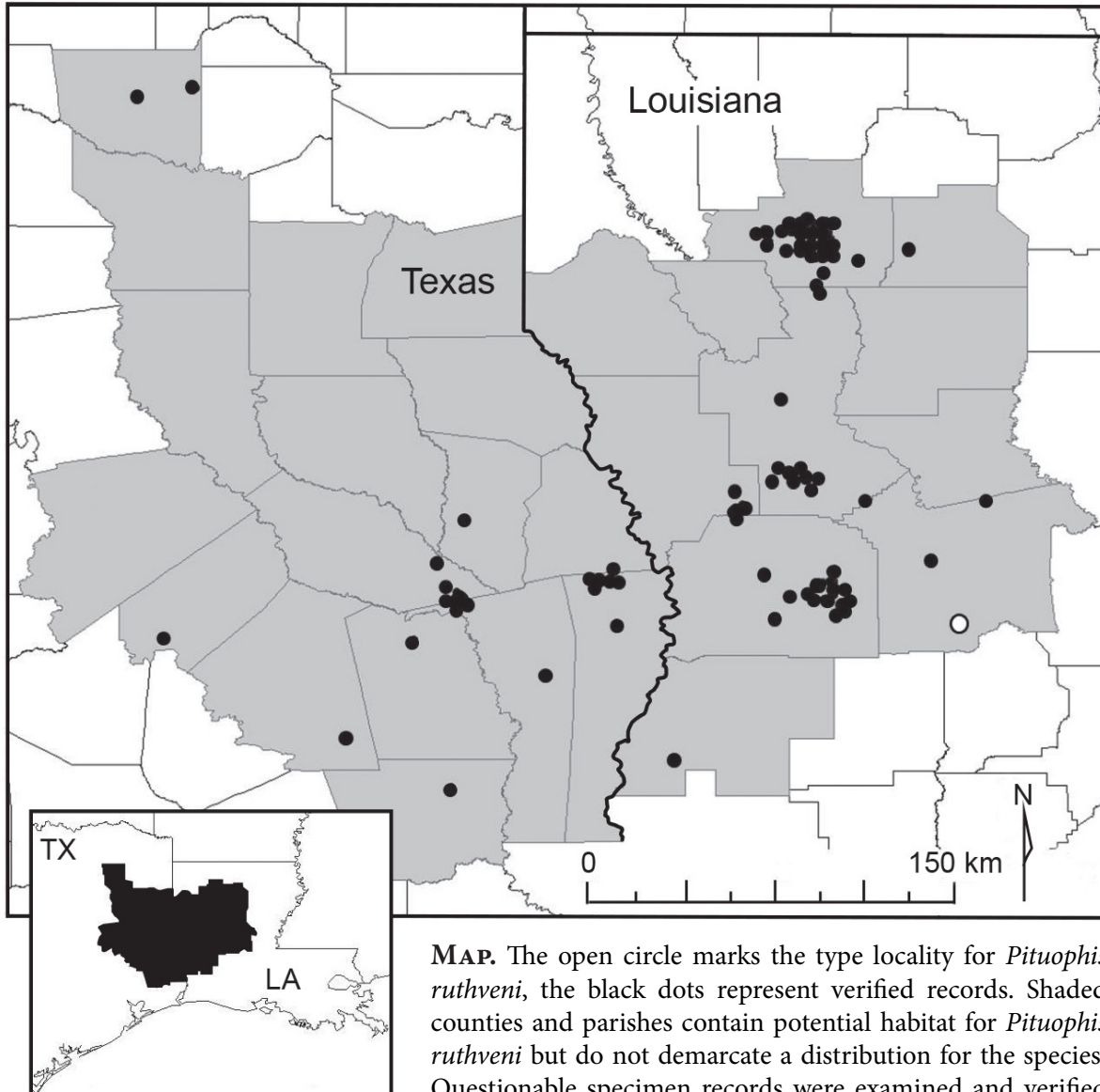
CONTENT. No subspecies are recognized.

DESCRIPTION. The Louisiana Pinesnake

(*Pituophis ruthveni*) is a large, heavy-bodied snake with adults reaching a size of 121.9–152.4 cm in length (Boundy and Carr 2017; Werler and Dixon 2000). Male snakes reach slightly larger sizes than females (Himes et al. 2002). Neonates of *Pituophis ruthveni* are, on average, the largest neonates of any North American snake, reaching 55 cm or larger (Reichling 1988, 1990). Four prefrontal scales are present on the forecrown, a distinguishing trait of snakes in the genus *Pituophis*. They possess an enlarged rostral scale that is typically longer than it is wide, and an undivided anal plate. The dorsal scales are keeled above the seventh scale row and arranged in 27 to 33 rows at midbody (Wright and Wright 1957, 1994). *Pituophis ruthveni* has a distinct pattern consisting of 28 to 42 brown blotches that are conspicuously different at opposite ends of the body (Conant 1956, 1958, 1975; Conant and Collins 1991a, 1991b, 1998). Near the head and neck, these blotches are



FIGURE 1. A male *Pituophis ruthveni* from Vernon Parish, Louisiana. Photo by Toby J. Hibbitts.



MAP. The open circle marks the type locality for *Pituophis ruthveni*, the black dots represent verified records. Shaded counties and parishes contain potential habitat for *Pituophis ruthveni* but do not demarcate a distribution for the species. Questionable specimen records were examined and verified to species.

typically a darker brown, and tend to join and intermingle to form a continuous band of darker streaks over a yellowish-beige ground color. Blotches towards the posterior of the body can be a lighter reddish-brown or dark-brown, are widely spaced, and well-defined against a yellow ground color. Dark spots and splotches cover the crown, and in some specimens an indistinct dark bar crosses the head between the eyes. The venter is marked with small, irregular black splotches (Stull 1929). Juvenile coloration does not vary significantly from that of adults.

DIAGNOSIS. The key diagnostic feature that distinguishes *Pituophis ruthveni* from *Pituophis melanoleucus* (Pinesnakes) is the presence of an enlarged rostral scale in *Pituophis ruthveni*. The rostral scale is raised slightly above the surrounding scales. The conspicuous pattern and coloration of the middorsal markings of *Pituophis ruthveni* is another distinct diagnostic feature that distinguishes this species from *Pituophis melanoleucus* and the associated subspecies (Stull 1929). Middorsal markings in *Pituophis melanoleucus* are fewer in number than in *Pituophis ruthveni*, rang-

ing from 23–30 (Reichling 2008). *Pituophis ruthveni* and *Pituophis melanoleucus melanoleucus* (Northern Pinesnake), both exhibit a pattern in which blotches along the middorsal line will intermingle into darker streaks towards the head and neck, and become more defined posteriorly. These markings in *Pituophis melanoleucus melanoleucus* are distinctly darker than the brown to reddish-brown markings of *Pituophis ruthveni*, and appear as a black coloration over a white ground color. *Pituophis melanoleucus mugitus* (Florida Pinesnake) is characterized as a rusty-brown snake with an indistinct pattern. The darker dorsal markings are vaguely visible. The ventral pattern is typically immaculate compared to the ventral markings seen in specimens of *Pituophis ruthveni*. *Pituophis melanoleucus lodingi* (Black Pinesnake) is distinguished by a plain (or nearly plain) black or dark brown coloration on both the dorsum and venter. *Pituophis catenifer sayi* (Bullsnake) is another closely related species that possesses an enlarged rostral scale; however, they can be distinguished by a pattern of 41 or more black, brown, or reddish-brown dorsal blotches (Werler and Dixon 2000). The markings in *Pituophis catenifer sayi* are more defined, and in strongest contrast with the yellow ground color, at both the posterior and anterior ends of the body. A dark band usually extends from each eye to the corner of the mouth. The dorsal scales are strongly keeled and usually in 33 scale rows at midbody. A light band surrounded by darker borders between the eyes on the crown can be present.

PHYLOGENETIC RELATIONSHIPS. Recent phylogenetic studies of the genus *Pituophis* recognized three species: *Pituophis melanoleucus* (Pinesnakes), *Pituophis catenifer* (Gopher Snakes and Bullsnares), and *Pituophis ruthveni* (Louisiana Pinesnake) (Krysko et al. 2014; Pyron and Burbrink 2009; Rodríguez-Robles and De Jesús-Escobar 1999, 2000). Notably, two of these studies (Krysko et al. 2014; Rodríguez-Robles and

De Jesús-Escobar 2000) recognized *Pituophis ruthveni* as a separate species despite the fact that multiple published hypotheses using parsimony, maximum likelihood, and Bayesian inference analyses of the mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) ND4 region placed this taxon within a clade of *Pituophis catenifer sayi* (Collins 2010; Collins and Taggart 2008; Rodríguez-Robles and De Jesús-Escobar 1999). The third study identified *Pituophis ruthveni* as sister to *Pituophis catenifer* using maximum likelihood and Bayesian inference analyses of both nuclear and mtDNA sequences (Pyron and Burbrink 2009). Because of these genetic similarities, evidence supporting the designation of *Pituophis ruthveni* as a separate species comes from the geographic isolation of its populations from other species (Conant 1956; Fitch 2006; Smith and Kennedy 1951; Thomas et al. 1976) and a combination of morphometric characters distinguishing *Pituophis ruthveni* from close relatives (Collins 1991; Knight 1986; Reichling 1995; Thomas et al. 1976). Thus, *Pituophis ruthveni* is recognized as a species under the evolutionary species concept (Reichling 1995). A limitation of the four phylogenetic studies described above was the use of only one or two genes to draw inferences among taxa. Additional research including more genes might provide genetic data that further supports *Pituophis ruthveni* as a full species.

PUBLISHED DESCRIPTIONS. Descriptions of *Pituophis ruthveni* as a subspecies of *Pituophis melanoleucus* were published by Conant (1956, 1975), Conant and Collins (1991a, 1991b), Dixon (1987), Dundee and Rossman (1989), Smith and Kennedy (1951), Stull (1929, 1932, 1940), Sweet and Parker (1990), Tennant (1984), Thomas et al. (1976), Wright and Wright (1957, 1994). A modern taxonomic review of *Pituophis ruthveni* was presented by Reichling (1995). Other published descriptions of *Pituophis ruthveni* as a distinct species were published by Boundy and Carr (2017), Conant and Collins (1998),



FIGURE 2. A male *Pituophis ruthveni* from Jasper County, Texas. Photo by Toby J. Hibbitts.

Dixon (2000, 2013), Dixon and Werler (2005), Tennant (1998, 2006), Wallach et al. (2014), and Werler and Dixon (2000).

ILLUSTRATIONS. **Color photographs** of *Pituophis ruthveni* were presented by Bailey et al. (2006), Bartlett and Bartlett (2005), Boundy and Carr (2017), Coborn (1991), Dixon (2013), Dixon and Werler (2005), Dundee and Rossman (1989), Hibbitts et al. (2016), Krysko et al. (2014), Mara (1994); Mehrtens (1987), Pustejovsky (2014), Reichling (2008), Tennant (1984, 1985, 1998, 2006), Tennant and Bartlett (2000), and Werler and Dixon (2000). **Color illustrations** were published by Conant and Collins (1991a, 1991b, 1998), Dundee and Rossman (1989), and Powell et al. (2016). **Black-and-white photographs** of *Pituophis ruthveni* were presented by Smith and Kennedy (1951) and Wright and Wright (1957, 1994). **Black-and-white illustrations** were published by Cagle (1952) and Conant

(1956, 1975).

DISTRIBUTION. *Pituophis ruthveni* is an inhabitant of the Longleaf Pine savannahs west of the Mississippi River in Louisiana and eastern Texas. The species is known from eight parishes in Louisiana (Boundy and Carr 2017, Dundee and Rossman 1989) and 11 counties in Texas (Dixon 2013); however, since 2000, this taxon has only been found in five Louisiana parishes (Bienville, Natchitoches, Rapides, Sabine, and Vernon) and four Texas counties (Angelina, Jasper, Nacogdoches, and Newton) (Hibbitts et al. 2016; U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2016). Records from the Louisiana parishes of Calcasieu and Jefferson Davis parishes and the Texas counties of Caldwell, Houston, Montgomery and Walker have been considered erroneous or are questioned (we examined these specimens as did Thomas et al. 1976).

FOSSIL RECORD. No fossils are known.

PERTINENT LITERATURE. Relevant citations are listed by topic: **captive care and longevity records** (Frye 1991; Mara 1994; Rossi 1992; Skubowius 2004; Slavens 1988; Slavens and Slavens 1991), **conservation and conservation status** (Allen 1986, 1987, 1988; Alvarez 2016; Anonymous 1993, 2017; Ashton et al. 2007; Bailey et al. 2006; Dodd 1987; Frank and Ramus 1994; Frye 1991; Graeter et al. 2013; Greenberg et al. 2014; Greene 1997a, 1997b, 1999; Hughes 2006; Jennings and Fritts 1983; Jones et al. 2016; King 2009; Kingston 1991; Köhler 2004; Levell 1997; Louisiana Office of the State Register 2017; McClain 1992; Ramos 1995, 1997; Rudolph and Burgdorf 1997; Rudolph et al. 1999, 2006; Seigel and Collins 1993; Texas Parks and Wildlife Department 1978; U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2010, 2013, 2014; Wiese and Hutchins 1994), **field techniques** (Adams et al. 2017; Buhlmann and Graeter 2013; Burgdorf et al. 2005; Graeter et al. 2013; Jensen 2013; Rudolph et al. 1998), **geographic distribution** (Anonymous 1963; Ashton 1976; Brown 1950; Burnie and Wilson 2001; Burt 1935; Clark 1949; Conant 1956; Conzelmann 2003; Crain and Cliburn 1971; [Devine and Haynes] 1964; Ernst and Barbour 1989; Fugler 1955; Gulf Coast Network 2010; Jennings and Fritts 1983; Kroll and Hicks 1975; Krysko et al. 2014; Mitchell and Tinkle 1960; Parks 1942; Parks and Cory 1936; Rakowitz et al. 1983; Raun and Gehlbach 1972; Rossi 1992; Seehorn 1982; Smith and Kennedy 1951; Southern Biological Supply Co., Inc. 1931; Stull 1929; Thomas et al. 1976; Vandeventer and Young 1989; Wilks 1962; Williams and Cordes 1996; Young and Vandeventer 1988), **habitat modeling** (Hibbitts et al. 2016; Wagner et al. 2014), **natural history and keys** (Bartlett and Bartlett 2005; Behler and King 1988; Boundy and Carr 2017; Burt 1935; Cagle 1952; Chaney 1982, 1990; Cochran and Goin 1970; Davis 1971; Ditmars 1946; Ealy et al. 2004; Ernst and Ernst 2003; Fritz 1986, 1993; Gibbons and Dorcas 2005;

Greene 1997a, 1997b, 1999; Himes et al. 2002, 2006; Keiser and Wilson 1969, 1979; Lodrigue 2008; Pierce et al. 2014a, 2014b, 2016; Powell et al. 1998, 2012, 2016; Pustejovsky 2014; Reichling 2008; Rudolph et al. 2002, 2007, 2012; Schmidt and Davis 1941; Scott 2014; Seehorn 1982; Simon 1979; Smith and Brodie 1982a, 1982b; Tennant 1984, 1985, 1998, 2003, 2006; Tennant and Bartlett 2000; Viosca 1950, 1962; Wright and Wright 1957, 1994), **popular press books** (Burnie and Wilson 2001; Coborn 1991; Mattison 1995, 2006; Scott 1996), **systematics and taxonomy** (Beltz 1995; Collins 1990, 1991, 1997; Collins and Taggart 2002, 2009; Collins et al. 1978, 1982; Committee on Standard English and Scientific Names 2008, 2012; Conant et al. 1956a, 1956b; Crother et al. 2001, 2003; Fitch 2006; Frank and Ramus 1995; Green et al. 2012; Hutchins et al. 2003; Klauber 1941; Krysko et al. 2014; Kwiatkowski et al. 2010, 2014; Pyron and Burbrink 2009; Reichling 1995; Schmidt 1953; Smith and Kennedy 1951; Stejneger and Barbour 1933, 1939, 1943; Stull 1932, 1940; Tipton 2005; Wrobel 2004).

ETYMOLOGY. The genus *Pituophis* is derived from the Greek word *pitys*, which means pine, and *ophios*, which means serpent. The species name *ruthveni* is a patronym honoring Alexander Grant Ruthven, an American herpetologist and former president of the University of Michigan (Beolens et al. 2011).

ADDITIONAL VERNACULAR NAMES. Louisianan Pine Snake (Simon 1979).

COMMENT. *Pituophis ruthveni* is arguably the rarest large North American snake. Less than 100 snakes were known before 1993 when efforts were made to trap for this species to try and learn about their status. As of June 2017, the number of snakes known is less than 310. The longleaf pine habitat, the preferred habitat of *Pituophis ruthveni*, was mostly logged by the 1930's, relegating populations of *Pituophis ruthveni* to remnant

forest patches. Additionally, fire suppression reduced available habitats where forest remnants remained. At present, only seven populations occur in Texas and Louisiana with no snakes observed in the three Texas populations since 2010. Texas populations are listed as endangered by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (Anonymous 1993); Louisiana (Boundy and Carr 2017) also prohibits the collections of this species from the wild. *Pituophis ruthveni* is currently a candidate for federal listing as a threatened species (U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2016).

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