

SPECIES PROFILE

Red-bellied Racer (*Alsophis rufiventris*)

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Among West Indian snakes, only the Dwarf Boas (*Tropidophis*) and the Blind Snakes (*Typhlops*) are represented by more species than the Racers (*Alsophis*). Racers are variable in color and pattern and members of the same species may look quite different on different islands. In the Lesser Antilles, home to five species of *Alsophis*, each is found on only one or a few islands. *Alsophis antillensis* is the most widely distributed, occurring on the Monserrat, Guadeloupe, and Dominica island banks. *Alsophis rijgersmaei* is found on the main islands of the Anguilla Bank, *A. rufiventris* on the Saba and St Christopher (St. Kitts) banks, *A. antiquae* on the Antigua Bank, and *A. sanctonum* on the Isles des Saintes Bank near Guadeloupe. The introduced Mongoose (*Herpestes javanicus*) poses a threat to most species of Racers on one or more islands, and several populations have been extirpated. The Red-bellied or Black Racer, *A. rufiventris*, for example, has been extirpated from Nevis and St. Kitts, and occurs today only on mongoose-free Saba and St. Eustatius (Statia).

On Saba and Statia, *Alsophis rufiventris* is widely distributed. It is a habitat generalist, found in disturbed and natural areas from near sea level to some of the highest elevations on these islands. It has been observed on the rim of The Quill at an elevation of 550 m on Statia, and within 30 m of the 864-m top of Mount Scenery on Saba. On St. Eustatius, this snake is most commonly encountered in shaded, rocky areas, which also harbor the densest populations of *Anolis schwartzi*, the predominant prey of *A. rufiventris* on Statia.

Like other members of the genus, *Alsophis rufiventris* is an actively foraging diurnal predator. Although primarily terrestrial, it sometimes ascends into shrubs and trees. Observations on Statia indicate that it spends roughly half of its time moving, with about half of that time spent searching for prey in leaf litter, under dead-fall, or in the abundant crevices of rock piles. Once a prey item has been seized, the snake may inject a weak venom to subdue its victim. *Alsophis rufiventris* is a non-aggressive species that rarely bites. Even if it does, it is generally considered to be harmless, as its venom infrequently elicits even mild reactions in humans. Like all other species of *Alsophis*, the Red-bellied Racer is oviparous, but little else is known about its reproduction.

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Adult *Alsophis rufiventris* from St. Eustatius (top) and from Saba. Photographs by John S. Parmelee, Jr.