

Red Milk Snake Taking Large Prey Late in the Season

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Photographs by the author.

Red Milk Snakes (*Lampropeltis triangulum sypila*) are secretive and little is known about their behavior when compared to many other North American snakes (Ernst and Ernst 2003). They are dietary generalists and are known to prey on mammals, birds, lizards, snakes, reptilian eggs, amphibians, fish, earthworms, slugs, and insects (see review in Ernst and Ernst 2003).

Milk Snakes have relatively small heads and mouths and narrow bodies, and they generally appear to prefer small, narrow prey (Fitch and Fleet 1970, Ernst and Ernst 2003). *Lampropeltis t. sypila* (total length [TL] 144–812 mm) is smaller than *L. t. triangulum* (TL 175–1140 mm; Williams 1988) and presumably eats smaller prey. Among the mammalian prey recorded for *L. triangulum* are voles (*Clethrionomys gapperi*, *Microtus ochrogaster*, *M. pennsylvanicus*, *M. pinetorum*; see review in Ernst and Ernst 2003). Fitch (1999) reported 36 prey items from 19 *L. t. sypila* and 8 scats. Nine of the prey items were *Microtus ochrogaster*; 8 of those were specifically identified as nestlings and size was not specified for the other.

On 28 September 2007 at 1433 h, I investigated a rodent distress call in Union County, Illinois. The call came from beneath leaf litter in a wooded area next to a gravel road between limestone bluffs and swamp. I saw a leaf move and lifted it, revealing an adult *L. t. sypila* with three coils around an adult Woodland Vole (*Microtus pinetorum*). The head of the vole protruded from the coils, but the snake's head was not visible. At 1436 h, the snake started searching for the head of the vole and, at 1439 h, it grasped the rostrum of the vole and began swallowing. Four people quietly observed the event and took flash photographs as unobtrusively as possible. The snake remained intent on consuming its meal despite the disturbance.

The snake finished swallowing the vole at 1519 h (40 min swallowing time) and before the prey had reached the snake's midbody, it started crawling out of sight into the leaf litter. During the event, we noted that the snake had a shriveled, blind left eye. The weather was sunny with an ambient air temperature of approximately 30 °C.

The snake was not restrained in order to allow it to finish its meal, and so the length and weight of the snake and the vole were not recorded. The vole was identified using features visible in the photographs. *Microtus pinetorum* has a uniform reddish-black dorsum and a short tail (18–24 mm) relative to its hind feet (approximately 16 mm). The habitat (leaf litter in oak, hickory, and maple forests) also was consistent with that used by *M. pinetorum* (Hoffmeister 2002).

This feeding event was notably late in the year for a *L. t. sypila* to be consuming prey. Fitch and Fleet (1970) recorded 20 natural food items for *L. t. sypila* in northeastern Kansas. All were consumed in late April, May, or early June, with the exception of one *Plestiodon fasciatus* in a snake captured on 25 September 1964. To my knowledge the present account is the first unambiguous report of *L. t. sypila* consuming an adult *M. pinetorum*.

Acknowledgements

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Literature Cited

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Adult Red Milk Snake (*Lampropeltis triangulum sypila*) constricting and swallowing a large Woodland Vole (*Microtus pinetorum*).