



Washington Department of
FISH & WILDLIFE



Understanding whipsnake distribution

A WDFW wildlife diversity grant project

The desert striped whipsnake is one of Washington's rarest snakes. Their populations have dwindled to just two known locations in Grant County, putting them at risk of local extinction in Washington. This project will investigate whether there are additional striped whipsnake populations in Washington, and seeks to document natural history observations and habitat use to better understand the conservation needs of striped whipsnakes in Washington.



Project name: Where are the whipsnakes?
Understanding the distribution of
Washington's rarest snake

Primary species benefitting: Desert striped
whipsnake

Grant total: \$64,160

Grantee & associated entity: Adrian Slade,
Central Washington University

Striped whipsnakes, who rely on the most complex and productive areas of shrubsteppe in Washington, serve as an indicator of high-quality habitat along the middle Columbia River. However, much of their remaining habitat has been degraded by wildfires and invasive species.

This project will produce an updated, detailed map of striped whipsnake distribution in the mid-Columbia basin of Washington after one year of surveys. Shed skins and scale clippings will provide genetic material for analysis to evaluate composition of potential new population sites. This project will lay the foundation for continuing to understand striped whipsnake distribution and will inform future conservation actions.





Project goals and outcomes

- **Survey new areas to better understand the distribution of striped whipsnakes in Washington.** This information is necessary to guide conservation actions for this species and understand what habitats can support them.
- **Compare habitat characteristics, such as lizard abundance and plant communities, in areas where whipsnakes are present and absent.** This will help determine necessary habitat criteria for their survival and inform protection efforts such as habitat restoration and whipsnake prey species conservation.
- **Learn more about striped whipsnake natural history in Washington by studying known populations.** Consistently monitoring whipsnakes will help fill gaps in current understanding of their habitat use, life history, and response to habitat changes, which will highlight necessary conservation actions to sustain and enhance existing populations.

Shedding light on a shrubsteppe obligate species



This project plays an important role in the conservation of Washington's unique and imperiled shrubsteppe biome, a landscape increasingly threatened by habitat loss, degradation, and wildfires. The striped whipsnake is a shrubsteppe obligate species, and its status directly reflects the health of this ecosystem. By identifying areas where whipsnakes occur, the project can also identify areas of high-quality shrubsteppe habitat in need of protection and restoration.

The outcomes of this research will also provide valuable information on the distribution, habitat use, and status of numerous reptile species in the shrubsteppe, including several Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN). Much like the shrubsteppe ecosystem, reptiles are understudied and overlooked in conservation practices. This project will help fill critical knowledge gaps about shrubsteppe reptiles and contribute to long-term monitoring, informing broader conservation strategies such as habitat restoration, connectivity projects, and biodiversity preservation – supporting Washington's ecosystem and species recovery goals.

All images by Adrian Slade.

This project was funded by WDFW through the [Wildlife Diversity Grant Program](#).

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March
2025