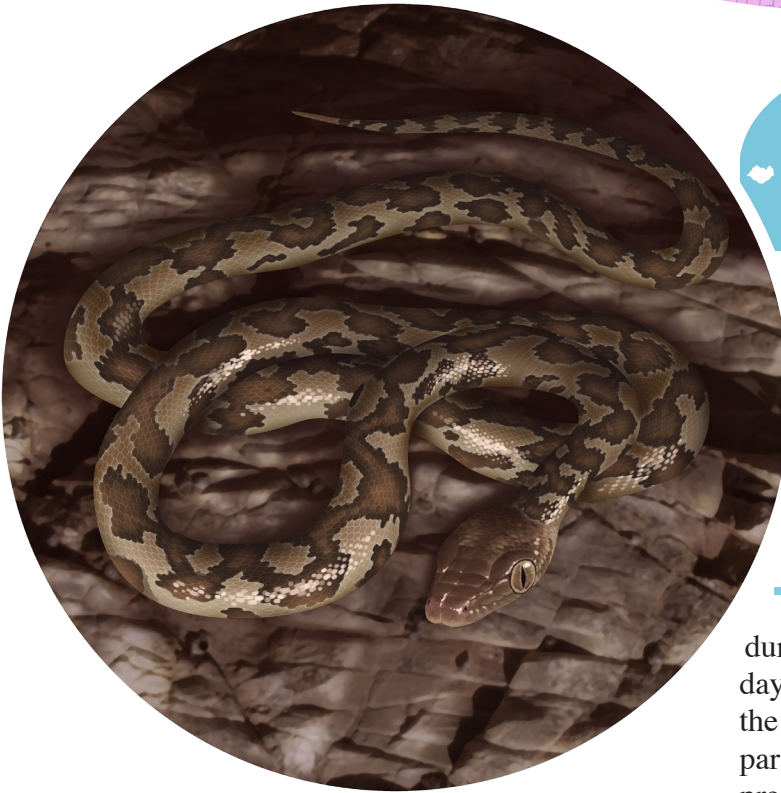


Virgin Islands Tree Boa

*Epicrates
monensis granti*



Family: Boidae
Order: Squamata

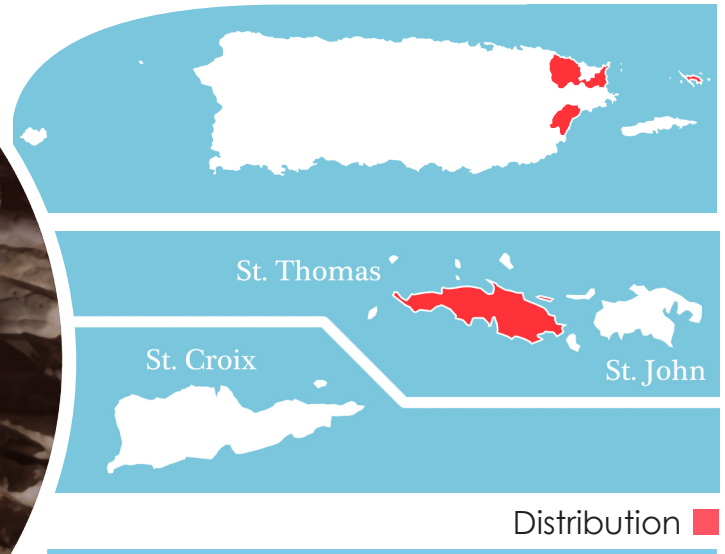
Description

The Virgin Islands (VI) boa is a native arboreal snake that can be easily identified within its range, since it is the only native snake with a mottled pattern on its skin. The coloring on adult snakes is a light brown or tan, with irregular black-edged dark brown spots, while its ventral area is cream colored, with grayish brown spots. Juvenile snakes are light gray with dark blotches, and change into the adult coloration as they grow. The VI boa can reach 41 inches (104 centimeters) in length, from snout to vent. This species is not venomous, and is harmless to people.

Biological Information

Reproduction

Like many other snakes in the *Epicrates* genus, courtship and mating occur from February through May. The pregnant females use thermoregulation



during the gestation period, which can last up to 150 days. Thermoregulation is the process through which the snake regulates its body temperature within certain parameters, even when the environment around it presents a different temperature than needed. Birthing usually occurs from August through October. The VI boa is ovoviviparous; that is to say, they give birth to live young. The young are born in litters comprised of 2 to 10 individuals, depending on the mother's size, and are totally independent after birth. There is no parental care. It is believed that females reproduce every other year, and the young take three years to reach sexual maturity. The VI boa's lifespan is between 10 to 20 years.

Habitat

VI boas usually live in forest or xerophytic (dry) scrubland, characterized by sharp inclines and rocky, poorly fertile soil. Vegetation is generally comprised of secondary growth, mostly deciduous trees (trees that shed their leaves at a certain time of the year) with coriaceous leaves (that is to say, leaves that have a hard, glossy surface), and small succulents (plants which preserve water in the roots, stems or leaves) and spiny scrublands found in dry, subtropical forests. This is also known to occur on low-profile islets; that is to say, islands with low rises, and cays with fossilized dunes and simple vegetation. As with the majority of boas, the VI boa is nocturnal, although it can often be

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seen basking during the day. However, it usually hides under rocks and fallen tree trunks during the day.

Diet

The VI boa is a predator, which mostly preys on lizards, hunting them by sliding along tree limbs. It also feeds on mice, eggs and young birds and small iguanas. Since it is a constrictor snake, the VI boa wraps its body around its prey, squeezing until the prey is asphyxiated before swallowing it headfirst.

Distribution

The VI boa is considered a species endemic to Puerto Rico, St. Thomas (USVI), and Tortola Island (BVI). In actuality, there are six stable populations. In Puerto Rico, the species exists in Diablo Cay, Ratones Cay, Río Grande, and Culebra. Recently, the boa has also been reported in the Municipality of Humacao. In the USVI, the species exists in St. Thomas and Stephen Cay. The species also inhabits Tortola Island (BVI).

Threats

The main factors contributing to the diminishing VI boa population are:

- Loss and modification of their habitat as a result of agriculture and development.
- Limited distribution
- Fragmented habitat
- Depredation from animals such as:
 - yellow-crowned night heron (*Nyctanassa violacea*),
 - black rat (*Rattus rattus*),
 - Norwegian rat (*Rattus norvegicus*), y
 - Asian mongoose (*Herpestes auropunctatus*)

Conservation Measures

The VI boa was included in the federal endangered species list in 1979. It is also included in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). In 2009, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service announced that, having completed a five-year survey about the VI boa, it was recommended to change their classification from 'endangered species' to 'threatened species'. However, the 'threatened' classification allows greater flexibility for investigating boas and breeding them

in captivity so as to expand the range of the activities implemented to preserve and recover the VI boa.

The Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended, prohibits the killing, harassing, trapping, purchasing or selling any species, as well as parts and products derived from the species.

Some Recommended Practices

There is still much work to be done before we can say the VI boa is recovered. The viability of their populations needs to be studied to determine how many additional individuals are needed to make up a healthy, sustainable population. We still do not have much knowledge about the species' distribution, nor how abundant they are within their habitat.

References

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Additional Information

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