



Tales from a
Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

Teeing off with a rubber boa

Eric Huffman was out for his weekly game of golf at Aspen Lakes when one of Oregon's most mysterious snakes showed up.

Huffman was all excited when he exclaimed over the phone, "Hi, Jim, you'll never guess what was right under my feet while I was out for my morning golf today at Aspen Lakes!"

I have given up guessing about what my wonderful callers are about to share with me, because it's always a surprise for both of us.

"I think it was a rubber boa!" Eric exclaimed, not giving me a chance to guess.

Seeing a rubber boa in Sisters Country isn't a surprise — but seeing it in broad daylight, on the green of the 9th hole certainly was. However, that said, if there's an old down and rotting pine or juniper not too far away,

there could be a whole family of rubber boas living the life of Riley nearby.

The native, not-so-commonly seen, rubber boa, *Charina botae*, is a non-venomous (can't hurt you) snake. In fact, it is probably the most non-threatening snake of all the 15 species of snakes inhabiting our beautiful state of Oregon. It couldn't bite you if it wanted to.

The range of rubber boas in Oregon is just about anywhere there's wet and rotting vegetation, earthworms, baby mice, a few juvenile salamanders and/or subterranean insect grubs, which they dine upon.

Way back in the mid-1960s, while taking a group of OMSI students on a field trip into Eastern Oregon, I placed several four-foot-square pieces of old carpeting around the high desert to see who would hide under them. On the next trip with the students, we found rubber boas hiding out with gopher snakes and rattlesnakes, and racers under the carpeting way in the back of an old mud volcano.

Al St. John — Oregon's renowned herpetologist, naturalist, scientist, and author of several excellent field guides to our native reptiles and amphibians — says the rubber boas are a remnant population from when there was a great inland sea in the Fort Rock basin, created by

the last glaciers that covered the surrounding hills some 10,000 years ago.

My introduction to the gentle, most northern member of the boa family was when I went to work for OMSI in the early '60s. I can still see that sweet little first-grader running up to me, all excited about her discovery. "Look, Mr. Anderson! I found this snake without a head — but it's got two tails!"

Which just about describes what you first see of a rubber boa. Its eyes are tiny, and unlike other snakes, it rarely sticks its tongue out at you. One of the most identifiable characteristics of rubber boas is their short blunt tails that closely resemble the shape of their head (or visa-versa).

Rubber boas are one of the smaller boa species, adults can be anywhere from 15 to 30 inches in length, with light brown above and a bright yellowish-orange underside. When protecting themselves from immediate danger, they often coil up and place their blunt tail out of the coil ... like it was a head instead.

The common name is derived from their loose, wrinkled skin consisting of small smooth and shiny scales, giving the snake a rubber-like look and texture. Their eyes have vertically elliptical pupils in their short blunt heads that are no wider than the body.



PHOTO BY ERIC HUFFMAN

A rubber boa that citizen-scientist Eric Huffman discovered at Aspen Lakes Golf Course.

In addition to most of Oregon and Aspen Lakes Golf Course, distribution of rubber boas covers a large portion of the western USA, stretching from the Pacific Coast east to western Utah and Montana, south to San Bernardino and San Jacinto Mountains east of Los Angeles, and as far north as southern British Columbia.

They've been found at elevations anywhere from sea level to over 10,000 feet.

Characteristics of rubber boas' behavior also set them apart from other snakes. They are considered one of the most docile of the boa species and are often used to help people overcome their fear of snakes.

Rubber boas never strike at or bite a human under any circumstances — but, like the common garter snake(s) — they will release a potent musk from their anal vent

(which is enough to gag a maggot) if they feel threatened. They are also primarily nocturnal, which partially contributes to how rarely they are encountered, and they hibernate during the winter months in underground dens.

These innocuous little snakes have also been known to feast on eggs of other snakes, lizards and ground-nesting birds. But he who lives by the sword... Rubber boas are preyed upon by almost any reasonably sized predator in their habitat. A hungry badger or great horned owl wouldn't turn one down.

Eric's experience at Aspen Lake Golf Course would seem to be a very lucky sighting. I give great thanks to Eric and those people who occupy the role of citizen scientists and report their observations.

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