

Albinism in the Elaphe climacophora

(by H. Bernard Bechtel)

An abnormally high number of albino Japanese rat snakes (*Elaphe climacophora*) has existed for many years in the city of Iwakuni, Japan. Japanese rat snakes are typically light olive with four light brown longitudinal stripes. As with many snakes of this genus, the young are blotched. Adult albinos are white to yellow with golden irises, red pupils, and red tongues. Juvenile albinos are marked by orange dorsal and lateral blotches corresponding to the juvenile pattern. Since this is the only known instance among snakes where albinism has become established in a wild population, the habitat known to support the albino population was designated a natural monument in 1924 by the Japanese Government, and in 1972 the snakes themselves were designated as the natural monument.

Their numbers are apparently decreasing, and not much is known about their historical abundance. Census since 1974 have shown progressive declines in reports of albinos, but wild types are still abundant. Because of this, the city and the Society for the Conservation of the Iwakuni shirohebis sponsored a study to elucidate the circumstances surrounding the establishment and maintenance of this unusual population. In 1924 residents of Iwakuni were questioned regarding these snakes. Snakes were reported to be abundant in stone walls, gardens, and streets, and it was not rare to find albino snakes in human residences. An artificial breeding program has been established to make sure that Iwakuni does not lose its unusual distinction among Japanese cities.