# ARIZONA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT
# HERITAGE DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

**Animal Abstract** **Element Code:** ARADB24020

## CLASSIFICATION, NOMENCLATURE, DESCRIPTION, RANGE

**NAME:** *Oxybelis microphthalmus* Barbour and Amaral, 1926
**COMMON NAME:** Thornscrub Brown Vinesnake

**SYNONYMS:** *Dryinus aeneus* Wagler, 1824
*Coluber acuminatus* Wied, 1824
*Oxybelis acuminata* Boulenger 1896
*Oxybelis aeneus auratus* Zweifel and Norris 1955

**OTHER COMMON NAMES:** Brown Vinesnake
Brown Vine Snake
Mexican Vinesnake
Mexican Vine Snake
Tropical Vinesnake
Neotropical Vinesnake
Neotropical Vine Snake
Thornscrub Vine Snake
Culebra-bejuquilla mexicana (Spanish)

**FAMILY:** Colubridae

**AUTHOR, PLACE OF PUBLICATION:** Barbour and Amaral, 1926. Proceedings of the New England Zoölogical Club 9:79-81

**TYPE LOCALITY:** Calabasas Canyon, Santa Cruz County, Arizona, USA.

**TYPE SPECIMEN:** MCZ 22417. Charles T. Vorhies. April 1925.

**TAXONOMIC UNIQUENESS:** There are 11 species within the genus *Oxybelis* (Uetz et al. 2026). *O. microphthalmus* is the only species in the genus that occurs in the United States (Nicholson 2025) and the only species of the genus in Arizona (Jones 2020). There are no recognized subspecies of *O. microphthalmus* (Nicholson 2025, Uetz et al. 2026).

This species was formerly included in *O. aeneus* (Crother et al. 2017, Jones 2020). Jaden et al. (2020) evaluated phylogenetics of the genus *Oxybelis* and recommended splitting a monophyletic *O. aeneus* into six species, with the species in Arizona and Mexico becoming

*O. microphthalmus*. This treatment was accepted by Nicholson (2025). However, Holycross et al. (2022a) recognized a single, widespread species (*O. aeneus*) because the sampling was limited. HDMS follows Nicholson in recognizing the taxon as *O. microphthalmus*.

**DESCRIPTION:** The Thornscrub Brown Vinesnake is long and thin, suitably named for resembling a vine, with a very long and distinctly pointed snout (Jones 2020, Holycross et al. 2022b). Total length typically varies from 1,197–1,337 mm (47.13–52.64 in) in males and 667–1,407 mm (26.26–55.39 in) in females (Jadin et al. 2020), but can reach lengths up to 1,620 mm (~60 in) (Holycross et al. 2022b) with the tail being about 40% of the total length (Murphy 2019). Dorsally, the Thornscrub Brown Vinesnake is brown to tan to gray while the chin and throat are a consistent bright creamy yellow (sometimes off-white) that fades to a smooth, creamy gray ventrally (Jadin et al. 2020, Holycross et al. 2022b). A fine, dark brown preocular stripe is present between the dorsal and ventral, which can appear faint or pronounced, and runs through the eye to the neck, and sometimes past. Flecks of black or brown are frequently distributed on the dorsum and venter (Jones 2020, Jadin et al. 2020).

There is no evidence that the Thornscrub Brown Vinesnake is sexually dimorphic (Keiser 1974). Dorsal scales are mostly smooth but can be slightly keeled, and are in 17 rows at the mid-body. The Thornscrub Vinesnake has the highest ventral scale count of any *Oxybelis* species, averaging 194 in males and 199 in females (Jones 2020). They also have an internasal ratio (eye diameter) of 0.82, which is the smallest of any *Oxybelis* species (Jadin et al. 2020). Another distinguishing feature of the Thornscrub Vinesnake is that a second pair of chin shields are in contact for most of their length (Jadin et al. 2020).

**AIDS TO IDENTIFICATION:** The Thornscrub Brown Vinesnake is unlikely to be confused with any other snake in Arizona, but two species it could be mistaken for at a distance are Sonoran Whipsnake (*Masticophis bilineatus)* and Green Ratsnake (*Senticolis triaspis*) (Jones 2020). The Sonoran Whipsnake is also slender and long, but is overall grayish in coloration. The Green Ratsnake differs by being uniformly olive-green (Jones 2020).

**ILLUSTRATIONS**

Color photo (Lowe et al. 1986, page 83)
Color photo (*Oxybelis aeneus*) (Stebbins and McGinnis 2018, page 363)
Color photos (Murphy 2019, page 208)
Color photo (*Oxybelis aeneus*) (Jones 2020, pages 278, 281, 284, Figures 1, 2, 3)
Color illustration (*Oxybelis aeneus*) (Holycross et al. 2022, page 127)
Color photos (*Oxybelis aeneus*) (Arizona Game and Fish Department 2023, https://live-reptilesofaz.pantheonsite.io/snakes-subpages/h-o-aeneus/)
Color photos (Van Devender et al. 2024, Figures 1 and 5)

Color photo (*Oxybelis aeneus*) (Arizona Wildlife Conservation Strategy, https://awcs.azgfd.com/species/reptiles/oxybelis-aeneus)

**TOTAL RANGE:** The Thornscrub Brown Vinesnake ranges from Oaxaca, Mexico northward to Santa Cruz County in Southeastern Arizona (Jadin et al. 2020).

**RANGE WITHIN ARIZONA:** Within Arizona, the Thornscrub Brown Vinesnake is found south-centrally in Santa Cruz County and southern Pima County (Jones 2020). It has been documented in the Atascosa, Pajarito, Patagonia mountains and adjacent mesquite basins (Holycross et al. 2022), and at Arivaca Lake in the southwestern end of the Tumacacori Mountains (Van Devender et al. 1994). Reports of populations in the Baboquivari and Santa Rita mountains remain unconfirmed (Holycross et al. 2022b).

## SPECIES BIOLOGY AND POPULATION TRENDS

**BIOLOGY:** The Thornscrub Brown Vinesnake is a cryptic species that is diurnal and mostly arboreal (Jones 2020). Thornscrub Brown Vinesnakes mimic the motion of wildblown vegetation to better blend in with their surroundings and camouflage well with branches and vines (Lowe et al. 1986, Jones 2020, Van Devender et al. 2024). Thornscrub Brown Vinesnakes glide fairly rapidly across the ground with their head and forebody elevated (Jones 2020). In Sonora, they have been observed or collected in all months except January. The lack of observations during colder months suggest inactivity during those times (Van Devender et al. 2024). Although no winter shelter sites have been recorded for the Thornscrub Vinesnake, it is assumed that they are utilized instead of their usual behavior of resting on low branches at night (Stebbins and McGinnis 2018, Van Devender et al. 2024). Henderson (1974) and Henderson and Nickerson (1977) described the typical sleeping position as a loose coiled, head down posture on the distal end of branches.

The Thornscrub Brown Vinesnake likely has a relatively small home range. Male Brown Vinesnakes (*O. aeneus*, or *O. potosiensis* as delineated by Jadin et al. (2020)) in Belize had a mean home range of 1.5 ha (3.7 ac) with females having a mean home range of 2.03 ha (5.0 ac) (Henderson 1974). Individuals moved relatively short distances, with mean daily movements <1 m (3.3 ft) (Henderson 1974). Movement patterns have not been determined for snakes in Arizona, but the capture of a snake in the Parajitos from an oak tree with multiple nearby shed skins suggests a similar pattern (Jones 2020).

The Thornscrub Brown Vinesnake is a visually-oriented, arboreal ambush predator that uses venom delivered via grooved rear teeth to immobilize its prey (Jones 2020, Holycross et al. 2022b). It relies on concealment and blending in with the surrounding environment to capture prey (Holycross et al. 2022b). When hunting, they move slowly while swaying gently like a

loose vine and sometimes approach prey with their tongue extended straight and rigid (Keiser 1975, Lowe et al. 1986, Jones 2020).

Predation on Thornscrub Brown Vinesnakes is relatively unknown, but likely predators include raptors, Greater Roadrunners (*Geococcyx californianus*), and other diurnal predators (Jones 2020). Documented predation events include a Sonoran Whip Snake (*Masticophis bilineatus*) observed ingesting an Thornscrub Vinesnake in Santa Cruz County (Cowles 2018), and a Gray Hawk (*Buteo plagiatus*) photographed with one in its mouth at Pena Blanca Lake (Jones 2020). The Striped Whipsnake (*M. taeniatus*) is also a known predator (Murphy 2019). Road kill is likely a major cause of mortality (Jones 2020).

When threatened, Thornscrub Brown Vinesnakes engage in a distinctive gaping behavior, widely opening their mouth to display their dark blue-black mouth lining in an attempt to deter predators. They will strike if the mouth display fails to stop the harassment, although they are usually reluctant to do so (Vorhies 1926, Gehlbach 1981, Van Devender et al. 2024). Although it is difficult to accurately assess, the Thornscrub Vinesnake often remains motionless when facing potential predators (Jones 2020). The lifespan of Thornscrub Brown Vinesnakes is unknown, although one captive snake lived 11 years (Snider and Bowler 1992).

The Thornscrub Vinesnake has one reported case of scoliosis, which left the subadult individual with caudal tail curvatures. Despite this, the snake appeared to be in healthy condition (Nieto-Toscano and Martínez-Coronel 2023). It was documented as being a host to cystacanths of oligacanthorhynchid acanthocephalans (spiny-head worms) in Arizona and Mexico (Goldberg and Bursey 2001, Paredes-León et al. 2008). Goldberg and Bursey viewed the snakes as paratenic hosts where development of the parasite stops, but has the potential to be transferred to the parasite's definitive host if consumed by a predator such as a hawk. As a mildly venomous species, bites may cause itching, burning, numbness, and occasionally swelling or blistering in humans (Keiser 1967). However, bites that result in envenomation are not common (Jones 2020).

**REPRODUCTION:** The Thornscrub Vinesnake is an oviparous species (Uetz et al. 2026), but little information is available about its reproduction. The suspected breeding season in Arizona is February through July, which is evident by spermiogenesis in males and vitellogenesis and ovulation in females (Goldberg 1998; Jones 2020). It is believed that eggs are laid in summer with a clutch size of 3-8 eggs, with eggs (2-2.5 in) in length (Lowe et al. 1986, Holycross et al. 2022b). Hatching occurs in July-August (Holycross et al. 2022b).

**FOOD HABITS:** The Thornscrub Vinesnake is carnivorous with the most common prey items being lizards (Jones 2020). It is known to consume lizards of the *Aspidoscelis* genus, including *A. deppii*, *A. communis, A. guttatus,* and *A. gularis* (Ramos-León et al. 2021,

Carbajal-Marquez et al. 2022, Grajales and Silva 2024). Other lizards that Thornscrub Vinesnakes consume include Toothy Skinks (*Plestiodon*), Green Anole (*Anolis*), Spiny Lizards (*Sceloporus*), Tree Lizards (*Urosaurus),* Central Plateau Torquate Lizard (*Sceloporus melanogaster*) (Quinter-Diaz et al. 2023). Less frequent prey items include frogs, birds, insects, and mammals (Keiser 1967, Holycross et al. 2022b, Quinter-Diaz et al. 2023).

**HABITAT:** Thornscrub Brown Vinesnakes primarily are found in woodland habitats, but can occupy a variety of habitats including temperate oak woodland, canyon riparian woodland, and pine-oak woodland communities, and desert-grassland communities with a heavy mesquite component (Murphy 2019, Jones 2020, Holycross et al. 2022b, Van Devender et al. 2024). They can be found on brushy hillsides and canyon bottoms containing oak walnut, sycamore, and wild grapes (Stebbins and McGinnis 2018). Most of the Sonoran records of the Thornscrub Vinesnake are in tropical vegetation or transitions between tropical and adjacent vegetation types (Van Devender et al. 2024).

**ELEVATION:** In Arizona, this species occurs from 1,150–1,450 m (3,772–4,757 ft) (Jones 2020). Throughout its overall range it occurs from sea level to 1,458 m (4,783 ft) (Van Devender at al. 2024). Van Devender et al. (1994) noted that winter freezing above 1,650 m (5,413 ft) and arid summers below 1,160 m (3,806 ft) might limit the distribution of Thornscrub Brown Vinesnake in Arizona.

**PLANT COMMUNITY:** Madrean Evergreen Woodland, Semidesert Grassland.
Occupied habitats may be dominated by *Fouquieria splendens* (Ocotillo), *Eysenhardita orthocarpa* (Kidneywood), *Mimosa* spp., and *Quercus emoryi* (Emory oak) (Jones 2020).

**POPULATION TRENDS:** Although often considered to be uncommon in Arizona, Thornscrub Brown Vinesnake populations appear to be stable in Arizona, and it is quite abundant in the tropical forests of Sonora (Jones 2020).

## SPECIES PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION

Status definitions: https://hdms.azgfd.com/species-list/columns
Heritage Network Conservation Status Rank definitions:
https://hdms.azgfd.com/species-list/columns/#SRANK

**AGENCY STATUS**

| | |
|---|---|
| **AZGFD:** | 2 (AZGFD, AWCS 2022) |
| **UFWS (Endangered Species Act):** | None |
| **U.S. Forest Service:** | Sensitive, as *O. aeneus* (USDA, FS Region 3, 2007, 2013) |

**Bureau of Land Management:** None
**Navajo Nation:** None
**Mexico:** None

**OTHER STATUS**

**Heritage Network Status:** GNR
S2

**IUCN**: LC, as *O. aeneus* (IUCN, Hammerson et al. 2019)

***PREVIOUS STATUS***

**AGENCY STATUS**

**AZGFD:** 1B (AGFD SWAP 2012)
WSC - Candidate, as *O. aeneus* (AGFD, WSCA 1996 in prep)
Candidate, as *O. aeneus* (AGFD, TNW 1988)

**MANAGEMENT FACTORS:** The Thornscrub Brown Vinesnake is tolerant of disturbance of its habitat, with no major threats identified (Hammerson et al. 2019). They are unlikely to suffer from over-collecting in Arizona because their habitat on the Coronado National Forest is accessible by few roads, so populations are probably relatively secure (Jones 2020). Jones (2020) suggested that a large fire that swept through most of the Pajarito and Atascosa mountains in May 2011 had minimal effects on local populations.

**PROTECTIVE MEASURES TAKEN:**

**SUGGESTED PROJECTS:**

**LAND MANAGEMENT/OWNERSHIP**[1]

State - AGFD Arivaca Lake and Land
USFS – Coronado National Forest.
Private

## SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION

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[1] The list is based on where HDMS has records for the species and potentially may not be complete.

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**EXTERNAL LINKS:**

Arizona Wildlife Conservation Strategy
Arizona Online Field Guide to the Reptiles and Amphibians of Arizona
NatureServe Explorer
iNaturalist

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:**

The genus name *Obybelis* comes from the Greek words *oxys*, meaning "sharp" or "pointed," and *belos*, meaning "dart" or "missile", referring to the species' elongated, pointed head and slender, dart-like body The species epithet *microphthalmus* comes from the Greek words *micros* and *ophthalmos* which mean "small" and "eye", referring to the species' relatively small ocular size compared to other *Oxybelis*. (Center for North American Herpetology 2025).

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1998-01-30 (SMS)
2003-04-03 (SMS)
2022-08-12 (MSB)
2023-04-09 (MBL)
2026-06-16 (JKR)