



Lake Erie Watersnake

Nerodia sipedon insularum

Current Status: (2009) Federally Threatened; State Endangered



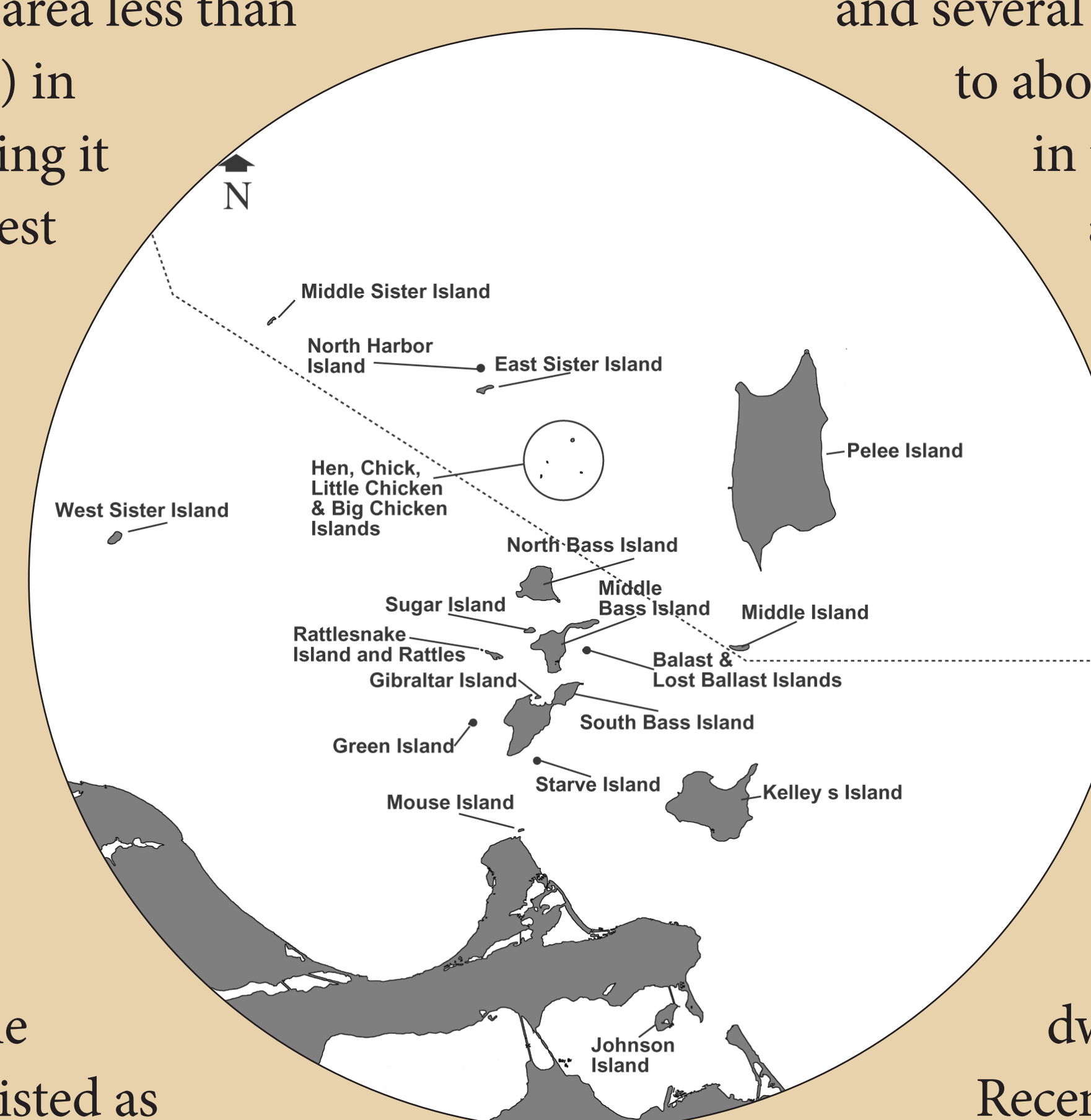
Lake Erie Watersnakes (LEWS) are medium-sized, non-venomous snakes known for their reduced and highly variable banding patterns compared to their mainland counterparts, Northern Watersnakes (*Nerodia sipedon sipedon*), which are present throughout mainland Ohio and much of the eastern United States.



The Lake Erie Watersnake is found only within the island region of the western basin of Lake Erie, an area less than 25 miles (40 km) in diameter, affording it one of the smallest geographic ranges of any vertebrate in North America.

LEWS populations were protected as early as 1977 in Canada. In the U.S., they were listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act in 1999 and as an Ohio state endangered species in 2000. Primary reasons for population declines were loss of habitat and human persecution.

The objectives of the LEWS recovery plan, which were achieved in 2009, included ensuring multiple viable subpopulations on the U.S. islands, sustaining summer and hibernation habitat, and reducing or eliminating human-caused deaths.



LEWS reproduce beginning in late May by forming "mating balls" of one female and several males. They give live birth to about 25 pencil-sized young in the late summer, usually around Labor Day. Young watersnakes grow quickly and reach adult size after 2-3 years. Female LEWS are larger and longer (4 ft) than the males (3 ft).

Historically, the LEWS diet consisted of native amphibians, such as mudpuppies, and bottom-dwelling fishes like catfish. Recently, however, more than 90% of their diet is made up of the round goby, an invasive species introduced to Lake Erie in the 1990s.

LEWS are active from late April through October and can be seen along the shoreline, basking among rocks and vegetation as well as man-made structures. They are also frequently spotted while foraging for food in the near-shore waters of Lake Erie.

LEWS, along with all northern reptile species, must hibernate underground to survive the cold winter. In the fall and spring, LEWS can be encountered as far as ½ mile inland as they travel to and from their overwintering areas, which include both natural and man-made structures.

Since 1999, the Lake Erie Watersnake has become a flagship species, bringing attention to the unique habitats and wildlife of the entire Lake Erie island region. The significant land protection for LEWS has surely benefited many other species that reside here.

Some people find living with LEWS to be bothersome. However, moving one far down the shoreline will not prevent the snake from returning. (They know where they live!) If you are having problems with

watersnakes living on your property, visit www.respectthesnake.com to find more tips to discourage snakes from certain areas of your home or personal watercraft.

