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Osa Conservation Supports Research in Golfo Dulce: Canary-colored Sea Snakes

April 26, 2012 | By Brooke Bessesen



Top: The vibrant yellow coloring of the X sea snakes in the upper latitudes of Golfo Dulce.
Bottom: the typical black/yellow coloring displayed by YB sea snakes seen near the mouth of the gulf.

A few years back, an Osa friend told me that entirely yellow sea snakes could sometimes be found in Golfo Dulce. The serpents were said to be as bright as canaries. The only sea snake found on the Pacific side of Costa Rica is the pelagic sea snake (*Pelamis platurus*), commonly named “Yellow-bellied Sea Snake,” because it’s black on the back and yellow underneath with black bands or spots on the tail. I finally found some scientific publications reporting rare accounts of all-yellow sea snakes

along Central America — including Golfo Dulce — sprinkled in with the bi-colored snakes. Intrigued, I decided to make the pelagic sea snake one of our focus animals for the 2010 survey.

To characterize the two color varieties in my field notebook, I labeled sightings for the typical black and yellow striped specimens as YB (for Yellow-bellied) and all-yellow or predominantly yellow specimens as X (for xanthic, which means “having yellow color”). We expected to find the X snakes scattered throughout the gulf among the YB snakes, but we were in for a big surprise.

All of our YB sea snakes were documented down near the mouth of the gulf and our distribution data showed the upper half of Golfo Dulce to be populated exclusively by X sea snakes. Moreover, our GPS sighting points marked a gap of over 13 miles between the two groups. We were stunned! We had pinpointed a resident xanthic colony separated from the broader Pacific population! Despite being the most widely ranging snake in the world, a xanthic colony of *Pelamis* has never been documented anywhere else, so the finding was indescribably exciting! By the end of our research we had logged a total of 68 X sea snakes near the inner basin of Golfo Dulce.

For anyone interested in the full scientific data relating to our research of these snakes, a paper entitled “Geospatial and Behavioral Observations of a Unique Xanthic Colony of Pelagic Sea Snakes, *Pelamis platurus*, Residing in Golfo Dulce, Costa Rica” is available through the journal *Herpetological Review* (March 2012).

Brooke Bessesen conducted Marine research at the Osa in 2010 and 2011 as a recipient of the [Greg Gund Memorial Fellowship](#). Check out her [Golfo Dulce report](#) on our website.

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