

Snakes Are on the Move - Just Let Them Go

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

This past week I've been averaging about two questions a day on snakes. All too often they've been pictures of dead snakes that people have killed because they are convinced that the snake is venomous, a copperhead, and is out to get them. In every single case they have been wrong! I honestly do not understand this panic stricken fear of snakes which puts them on the "must kill" list. If someone can logically explain it to me, then please do.

So here are the facts. We have somewhere between 18 and 20 species of snakes in this area. Three of them are venomous. Please don't call them poisonous because they aren't. They are venomous, meaning that they have venom. Poisonous is something that poisons you like nightshade, hemlock or poison ivy. Snakes and spiders like black widows and brown recluse are venomous. Back to the three venomous snakes: copperhead, massasauga and timber rattlesnake. Yes, we have them in our immediate area but none of them are all that common. Copperheads are the most widespread, the two rattlesnakes are in very isolated pockets.

Even our three venomous snakes are very beneficial to the ecosystem. Smaller snakes, like the docile ringneck snake and very common garter snakes eat lots and lots of insects and frogs and earthworms. Yup, they're a real threat to you and me! The somewhat larger snakes like the aptly name rat snake and gopher snake and kingsnakes feed on a variety of small mammals including rats and mice.

Now here's the big shocker: they aren't out to get you! They want nothing to do with you. If they act aggressive towards you it's because you are swinging a broom at them, or a shovel or hoe, and it's the only way to defend themselves is to try to scare you. Think about your size in comparison to their size. How would we feel around something that was 30 feet tall and outweighed us by about 200 times? For the most part they don't even want in your house.

The one exception to that is if you have an older house with a limestone foundation. They like to find cracks in rocks to get into locations where they can spend the winter. Old hand dug wells with limestone walls are a favorite. Nice warm, relatively speaking, locations with cracks and crevices to coil up in and spend the winter. Root cellars and old rodent tunnels are also likely hibernacula (places where snakes hibernate in the winter.) The need to hibernate is why snakes are extra active right now. They are locating safe wintering locations.

If you want to reduce the risk of accidentally getting a snake in your house, take some simple steps to exclude them. Keep things cleaned up and trimmed up around the house. Look for any small cracks or openings of any kind in your foundation and seal it up with caulking or expanding foam. This will also help keep insects out and warm air in this winter!

It's very easy to differentiate between venomous and non-venomous snakes. All of our venomous snakes are pit vipers and as such they have eye pupils that are slits, like a cat's eye. In bright light they will have a very narrow slit for a pupil. Non-venomous snake's eyes have round pupils just like we have. You don't even have to get close to see this. Two of the snakes are rattlesnakes and will have at least a few rattles on their tails. The copperhead is pretty distinctive with fairly wide bands or blotches. Young copperheads have a distinctive yellowish tail.

Please, if you see snakes around this time of year, just keep your distance and leave them alone. If you avoid them you don't have to worry. Killing them doesn't do you or the environment any good. Keep your house sealed up, things cleaned up and winter will be here soon!