



Brunswick Wildlife Snakes!

Snakes are mean. Snakes are slimy. Snakes wreak havoc on airplanes. Right? No, no, and heck no! Much of our collective “knowledge” of snakes is myth so let’s remedy that by discussing a bit of their natural history and some basics of snake safety.

Hopefully, you were not one of the three or four people nationwide that paid to see the recent movie “Snakes on a Plane”. I look forward to the day an airline accidentally shows it as their movie on a transcontinental flight. Now that is really mean!

There are too many real dangers to feed one’s fear of flying without this movie. Crashes, delays, lost luggage, airline meals...and the guy behind you with the hacking cough. I have recurring nightmares about being on a long, crowded flight with all other passengers holding crying babies. Now that is really scary!

Oops...pardon the digression...back to the subject. Brunswick County has a good number of snakes and a large majority are non-venomous like the Brown and Red-bellied Watersnakes. These two species are relatively common along our creeks and rivers and in wetlands. The Red-bellied may travel long distances over land to go from wetland to wetland; however, the Brown Watersnake is seldom far from its aquatic home.

All snakes are carnivores. Eating no plant matter, their diet ranges from insects to fish to rodents and even to other snakes. The Red-bellied Watersnake eats fish, frogs and toads while the Brown feeds almost entirely on fish, especially catfish.

Snakes swallow their prey whole. Their upper and lower jaws are loosely hinged and their bodies expand easily so they can swallow prey larger than themselves.

Snakes are not at the top of the food web. Predators that eat snakes and snake eggs include many birds such as wading birds, hawks, and owls; mammals such as raccoons, skunks, otters and opossums; and other snakes.

Snake's bodies are covered by scales are not slimy. Their eyes are protected by clear scales so they do not need movable eyelids and, since snakes cannot blink, they appear to stare. It is a myth that snakes hypnotize their prey.

Snakes do not have ear openings or a middle ear so they cannot hear airborne sounds. They "hear" vibrations detected through the ground or water. Most have very good vision and well developed senses of taste and smell. Their forked tongue gathers odor particles for analysis of chemical content by organs at the roof of their mouth enabling them to follow a trail of scent.

Finding a venomous snake in one's yard is very unlikely. Copperheads are mostly upland snakes and are the most likely to be found in your yard. Copperheads are responsible for most of the snakebites in the Southeast but fortunately their venom is less potent.

Five of the six venomous snakes that occur in Brunswick County are pit vipers (members of the family *Viperidae*) with hollow, retractable fangs. In addition to the Copperhead, the other four are the Cottonmouth and Eastern Diamondback, Timber, and Pigmy Rattlesnakes. The other venomous snake is the Coral Snake and there is almost zero chance of encountering one around our neighborhoods.

Pit vipers generally differ in shape compared to non-venomous snakes. Their bodies are noticeably wider and their head is usually larger with a triangular shape. If you are watching a snake through binoculars at a safe distance, you can identify vipers by the "slits and pits" method. Slits refer to their elliptical pupils. Pits are indentations found between a viper's eyes and nostrils. Pits are heat-sensing organs that sense infrared radiation for nocturnal hunting and are capable of detecting the body heat of prey as small as a mouse.

Snakes do not want to see humans as much as most folks do not want to see them. If left alone, they will move off...snakes do not chase people. Most folks are bitten because they step or stick a hand into bushes or brush piles without looking...or when walking in the woods, they step over a log before looking where they are stepping.

Mostly bites occur when snakes are surprised. They do not have the space or time to retreat so they may bite in self-defense as a matter of last resort. Other bites occur because people try to handle a snake instead of just leaving it alone.

The good news is that few people across the country are bitten and very few of those bitten will die. Some may wish they were dead due to the pain and swelling but will pull through with no problem.

Snake bites are not all the same. Some are more serious than others. If bitten stay as calm as possible and seek immediate medical assistance...you have an hour or more not just a few minutes to seek treatment. In many cases, little or no venom is injected; however, the person bitten may need a tetanus vaccination even if the snake is non-venomous.

Forget outdated remedies! Do not use snake-bite kits that involve cutting puncture wounds and use of a tourniquet. The wound area should not be treated with ice or heat. Also, regardless of what you may have seen in cowboy movies, do not drink alcohol.

Development has caused a decline in the number of snakes due to loss of habitat; however, many snakes are indiscriminately killed by well-meaning folks. Please do not kill or harass snakes because they are beneficial. We do not like many of their natural prey so let's maintain a balance in nature by letting snakes live. Accept, appreciate, and respect snakes...from a distance.

John Ennis