

Snakes – by Sally Cureton

Some of us, when we moved to the mountains, welcomed the presence of snakes. Others did not. However, they are part of our environment here, and actually a very valuable part. Snakes are an important component of our ecosystem. They are part of the balance of nature, both as predator and prey. They feed on many invertebrates such as slugs, worms and insects as well as small mammals. Some species consume great numbers of rodents.

As part of the reptile family, snakes are cold-blooded. As the temperature drops below 70 degrees, they become less and less active. At 50 degrees, most of them no longer move about. This is the time of year when we see snakes out basking in the sun, warming up their bodies.

Snakes find their prey by sight and scent and sometimes temperature. Their sense of smell is excellent, thanks to a constantly flicking forked tongue. This tongue carries a scent to a specialized sensory organ on the roof of their mouths. With no chewing teeth, all snakes swallow their meals whole. They may eat several times a day or as rarely as once a month. What is truly remarkable about their diet is that they are able to swallow animals with diameters larger than their own. This is thanks to an extra joint in their lower jaw that allows for extra expansion. What teeth they do have curve back so that even if dinner is alive and kicking, it is not likely to get free.

Snakes and their eggs are eaten by amphibians, other snakes, birds and mammals such as skunks, raccoons and opossums. Of course many snakes are eaten by hawks and owls, but surprisingly large numbers of smaller ones are consumed by songbirds.

Even though most snakes are harmless to humans and all are beneficial to our environment, I realize that many people still don't want them around. However, if there is enough activity around a home or yard, a snake will generally not want to hang around and will be eager to find a quieter place.

Two of the snakes we have in this area are Eastern Garter Snake and the Northern Copperhead. One is very benign and the other slightly venomous. Garter snakes occupy a variety of habitats and have been called a gardener's best friend. There was one curled up outside near a corner of my house for a few days last year. I was sorry to see him leave. A garter snake's saliva will produce a swelling or burning rash in some people. They may or may not bite if handled. We had baby garter snakes in our yard when I was growing up and I was never bitten even

though I played with them many times.

Garter snakes can be up to 48 inches long and have three light colored stripes on a black, dark brown, tan or greenish body. Females give birth to 9-57 live young. It is the most widespread snake in North America. In doing my research for this article, I discovered there is also a New Mexico Garter Snake, a Texas Garter Snake and an Eastern and a Western Blackneck Garter Snake, among others. There's even a Chicago Garter Snake.

As for the Northern Copperhead, we have them in Massanutten because they tend to live in rocky, forested areas. The alternating patches of tan, brown, olive and grey in an hourglass shape on their bodies keep them well-camouflaged. The head of a copperhead is broad and flat with a large pit evident between the eyes and nostrils. Juveniles have greenish yellow tail tips. Like the garter snake they give birth to their young live, usually about 6-10 in number. Their principal food is mice although they will also eat small snakes, lizards, amphibians and insects. These are normally very lethargic snakes, generally content to lie motionless. Thus the copperhead snake typically responds to danger by remaining still, and does not strike unless it feels that it is being attacked. In the spring and fall they are most active during the day. But during the summer, they move around primarily at night. They can often be found under boards in rural settings, or in wood piles, leaf litter, or old stone walls. A copperhead's venom is not very strong. It's bite, while painful, is not considered dangerous to humans.

In this area a contact for any questions or concerns about snake bites is the Blue Ridge Poison Control Center at the UVA Health System, 1-800-222-1222.