

Summertime and Snakes by Sarah Belles

The beginning of summer means that temperatures are starting to rise, bringing thoughts of vacations and outdoor fun to many people. We aren't the only ones with warm weather on our mind though—many critters who have been hibernating for winter have already been making their way back into the world. Snakes are a part of this group and they begin to leave their dens as early as the end of February and beginning of March. If you plan on being outside during the warm summer months, it's a good idea to refresh yourself on snake safety practices.

Since they rely on outside factors to regulate their body temperature, snakes can't handle extreme temperatures. During the summer they will typically be out in the mornings and nights when the temperature is not so severe. Pay attention to the type of environment you are in, as that can give you a pretty good idea of what snakes could be around. Areas with tall grass, small cubbies, objects with space under them, ponds, and creeks are just some of the places you could potentially come across a snake. It's best to be aware of your surroundings no matter where you are to make sure you don't accidentally get too close or even step on one! A great thing to have around is a field guide to snakes found in your region. If you don't have one, the internet is a great resource to look for information if you come across an unknown snake.

There are a few general traits that you can look for to get an idea of whether or not a snake might be venomous. One good example is the triangular head shape that venomous snakes tend to have. Venomous snakes also typically have eyes that resemble those of cats, with long, vertical pupils. The color of a snake can be useful in some cases, but can be confusing in others. An example of species that look very similar are venomous Coralsnakes and non-venomous Milksnakes and Kingsnakes. If you've never heard the rhyme "red on yellow, kill a fellow," you might not realize that the order of the red, black, and yellow bands can help differentiate the venomous from the non-venomous species.

A field mark that you might hear before you even see a snake is a tail rattle. Rattlesnakes have so-called "rattles" on the end of their tails that make noise when shaken to warn off predators. Be aware though that non-venomous snakes can and will often do things to alter their body shape or behavior in order to appear venomous, such as flattening their heads or vibrating their tails.

No matter what type of snake you may stumble upon, venomous or not, the best thing you can do for your safety and the snake's is to leave it alone. When snakes feel threatened, they are going to act tough to deter you from approaching. If given plenty of space and left alone, a snake will not bother you. If you have small children or animals, however, and are worried about a venomous snake found on your property, call a wildlife professional to potentially relocate it for you instead of trying to take care of it yourself. It is also good to avoid killing snakes since some are actually under protective status, such as the Timber Rattlesnake.

Ultimately, it's always a good idea to be cautious and aware of your surroundings and to be respectful of the boundaries of snakes and other wild animals you might come across when navigating the outdoors. Have a great summer, and stay sssssafe!



Western Ribbon Snake. Photo by: Holly Belles