

We receive numerous calls every year about snakes at Lake Carroll, and every one of these calls are from members that are NOT snake lovers! Snakes may very well be some of the most feared creatures, and much of this fear comes from misinformation or misunderstandings due to lack of knowledge about snakes.

This article is to help educate you about snakes in general, their ecological benefits to Lake Carroll and your homes, as well as actions you can take to deter snakes from being around your home. I will also precursor this with it is illegal to kill snakes in Illinois. Don't be so quick to kill, or want to kill, a snake. Give it some time (10-15 minutes), and it will leave. If it is there, it is hunting harmful rodent pests that cause way more damage to your property than that snake ever will. "Overcoming fears and prejudices about these misunderstood creatures is a first step in learning how beneficial they are. Allowing them to co-exist with man benefits us all."

Of the 40 species of snakes that inhabit Illinois, only 4 of them are venomous. Eleven of the 40 are on the endangered or threatened species list. As for Lake Carroll, the majority of venomous snakes in Illinois occur in the southern one-third of the state, and of the four venomous snakes inhabiting Illinois, 2 are on the endangered and threatened list. Therefore your chances of seeing a venomous snake here would be pretty rare.

Snakes, as well as other reptiles, are coldblooded. They cannot regulate their body temperature like we do; therefore they are the same temperature as their surrounding environment. This is why snakes can feel cold to the touch at times, and why you see snakes 'sunbathing' or 'basking' in the sun on the lakefront.

Even though snakes can be cold to the touch, they are not slimy feeling like many think.

One reason, I believe, for the fear of snakes is that snakes don't have eyelids or ears. This ominous stare provides many people with a shiver up their spine, and misunderstandings of what snakes are about. Since snakes do not have ears, they hear by feeling vibrations in the ground.

Another fear some have is that the tongue of a snake can sting you. This is false. The tongue is used to taste and detect odors in the air around the snake. This helps them to find prey as they hunt. Again, having snakes around the lake is very beneficial to help control rodents and other pests around your home.

While most snakes are not aggressive towards humans, they will 'bluff' a would-be predator (or human) by flattening their head, coiling, or vibrating their tail and giving the appearance of a venomous 'rattlesnake'. This is a defense mechanism for snakes to help them evade predators. However, if you try to grab or attack them, they may strike or bite at you. Just like other wild animals. And just like other wild animals, it's best to give them some space and let them leave on their own.

## ILLINOIS' VENOMOUS SNAKES

There are four species of venomous snakes found in Illinois, and they all share three common characteristics:

- (1) an elliptical cat-like pupil;
- (2) a heat-sensing pit on each side of the head in between the eye and nostril;
- (3) a single row of scales on the underside of the tail.

The four species are the Copperhead, Cottonmouth Water Moccasin, the Timber Rattlesnake, and the Eastern Massasauga. Bites by venomous snakes most often occur when someone picks up a venomous snake, they step on it, or they corner the snake forcing it into a defensive position.

However, most snakebites in the United States happen to people working with them in captivity and of those bitten less than one-tenth of one percent actually die. There are more people killed by bee stings and lightening strikes each year than are killed by snakebites. Either way, if you do see a venomous snake, leave it alone.

## SNAKE CONTROL

Even though snakes are very effective in helping to control rodents and some insect pests, and they aren't aggressive towards humans, it can still be startling to come upon one unexpectedly in the field, in your yard, or on the lakefront. If getting startled by a snake isn't on your daily 'to do' list, here are three things you can do to reduce the change of a surprise encounter.

- (1) Keep your lawn mowed regularly; tall grass can be good habitat for snakes.
- (2) Keep woodpiles off the ground; these make good nesting sites for rodents, which in turn attract snakes.
- (3) Keep the area around your house free of trash piles and rubbish; Mice, again, are attracted to these potential nesting sites, which in turn will attract snakes.

You must keep in mind that even though you follow these steps, you may still get an occasional snake. As previously stated, don't be so quick to kill, or want to kill, a snake. Give it some time (10-15 minutes), and it will leave. If it is there, it is hunting harmful rodent pests that cause way more damage to your property than that snake ever will.

Reference: Scott R. Ballard Natural Heritage Biologist Herpetologist Illinois Dept. of Natural Resources "Snakes of Illinois"



Photo credit: National Wildlife Federation,  
Northern Water Snake, Jeffrey Pott