

Snake Safety

Slithering creatures may evoke fear, but it's best not to overreact.



Snakes fear people. When cornered, though, they may appear threatening.

Of all the critters that skitter in Texas, nothing makes the heart race faster than the slithering kind. But Texas Parks and Wildlife Department herpetologist Andy Gluesenkamp says the snakes you spot are likely more

afraid of you than you are of them.

"Snakes fear humans," he says. "To them, we probably appear to be large, noisy animals that may harm them or try to eat them. When a snake is confronted by a large animal, it usually tries to hide or escape."

It's when snakes can't hide or escape that their behavior can seem threatening. When cornered, says Gluesenkamp, "they may stand their ground hissing, rattling their tail (rattles or not) and generally trying to look dangerous and unpalatable."

This acting job has worked wonders considering how many people are afraid of them. However, the reality is that most Texas snakes aren't dangerous; of 105 kinds (species and subspecies) statewide, 15 are venomous to humans. But, whether the snakes are harmless or not, most folks don't welcome the sight of one and aren't quite sure what they should do if they see one.

According to Gluesenkamp, it's more a matter of what you shouldn't do: Don't let yourself get rattled. The best way to keep a snake from overreacting is not to overreact yourself. Instead, step back slowly until a space at least the length of its body is between the two of you. Then, tiptoe away. If you hear a rattlesnake rattling, make sure you know where the snake is before you move.

Venomous snakes in Texas, with the

exception of the coral snake (*Micrurus* spp.), are pit vipers — cottonmouths (*Aghkistrodon piscivorus*), rattlesnakes (*Crotalus* spp. and *Sistrurus* spp.) and copperheads (*Aghkistrodon contortrix*). These snakes, says Dr. Edward J. Wozniak, a doctor of veterinary medicine with the Zoonosis Control Division of the Texas Department of State Health Services, locate prey with "one of the most sensitive and sophisticated infrared [heat] receptor systems on earth."

He stresses that a slow-motion response is particularly important around them. "Any attempt to step quickly past a questing pit viper is likely to entice the animal to strike, especially if the person is scantily dressed and giving off a detectable heat signature that is in the same temperature range as a prey item." He suggests wearing boots and long pants and walking "slowly, steadily and methodically when in snake country."

Gluesenkamp also has sound advice. "As with anywhere else outdoors, watch your step and do not put your hands or feet where you cannot see them."

When turning over anything that's been in the same place for a while, flip it toward you (not away from you) and remain alert in case there's a surprise underneath. At night, use a flashlight when walking on paved areas, because snakes often warm themselves on surfaces that have soaked up heat during the day.



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Reduce the chances of an unwanted visit by eliminating items that snakes and their prey use for shelter. Glusenkamp says, "This includes keeping lawns mowed, removing brush, trash piles, wood piles and old outbuildings. Cover openings under your house, steps and porch with hardware cloth or screen to keep critters out."

No matter how unpleasant you may find these members of the suborder *Serpentes*, keep in mind the important role they play in our ecosystem. "The majority of our native snake species are predators of rodents and undoubtedly make a major contribution to their control. In some regions of the state, informed individuals have even used the release of Texas rat snakes (*Elaphe obsoleta lindheimeri*) as a form of biological control to rid their attics, barns and other buildings of roof rats," explains Wozniak.

So, the next time something slithers nearby, try remembering not only to stay calm, but also how beneficial the slitherer is for keeping disease-carrying rodents in check. Though, as you tiptoe off, "beneficial" may be the last word on your mind. ★

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