

SNAKES ... love 'em or leave 'em alone

After the recent flooding, several residents saw snakes in their yard which they had not seen previously. Whether it was the flooding or the changing temperatures (snakes moving to winter homes), when you see a snake in your yard, you are likely startled and concerned about whether it is dangerous or not. A great many of the snakes that are part of DeKalb's natural ecosystem are totally harmless, just playing their role in the scheme of things. A common black rat snake can easily eat 3-5 rodents every month. If you eliminate a black rat snake, either another snake will come to enjoy the local food supply or the local rat population will increase. Other Georgia snakes eat worms, eggs, fish, crayfish, birds,

Whether or not you are totally sure about the identification of a snake, the best thing to do is to avoid the snake and let it go about its business. Snakes have no reason to bite humans unless provoked or frightened. Be especially watchful around places that can provide shelter or food to snakes, e.g. logs, rocks, and similar natural materials, especially when piled up. When hiking or working in such areas, it is advisable to wear sturdy leather boots that extend above the ankle

In 2005, Jim Rodgers of Nearly Native Nursery, gave a talk to the Georgia Native Plant Society in which he gave the following 3 critical features to reasonably differentiate quickly between venomous and non-venomous snakes. Some websites that have pictures and descriptions of local snakes are given below also.

FEATURE	VENOMOUS SNAKES	NON-VENOMOUS SNAKES
Head	Triangular shape Eyes invisible from above	Non-triangular shape Eyes visible from above
Pupil	Vertical pupil (cat's eye)	Round pupil
Swimming posture	Much of body at water surface	Only the head out of the water

It has been said that the bite of a young venomous snake may be more dangerous than that of an adult, because young snakes tend to inject their full load while adult snakes may give a warning bite with little venom.

A couple good websites for snake info:

- ◆ <http://www.uga.edu/srelherp/snakes/index.htm> is the snake portion of the website of UGA's Herpetology Program and provides an extensive set of snake photos (for I.D.) plus detailed information about each species.
- ◆ http://www.snakesofgeorgia.com/identify_a_snake has photos of venomous and non-venomous snakes. <http://www.snakesofgeorgia.com/home> is the homepage of Southeastern Reptile Rescue and includes "brochures" on "Guide to a Snake Free Yard", "Guide to a Snake Free House", and "Snake Bites".
- ◆ <http://warnell.forestry.uga.edu/ughs/docs/snakes.ppt> provides a PowerPoint presentation on Georgia snakes.

Copperheads seem to be the snake most often feared locally. Here is some info about Copperheads.

[from <http://www.uga.edu/srelherp/snakes/agkcon.htm>] **Copperheads** are fairly large – 24 - 40 in (61 - 102 cm), **heavy-bodied snakes with large, triangular heads and elliptical pupils (cat eyes)**. The body is *tan to brown with darker hourglass-shaped crossbands* down the length of the body. Individuals from the Coastal Plain often have crossbands that are broken along the center of the back. The head is solid brown, and there are two tiny dots in the center of the top of the head. *Juveniles resemble adults but have a bright yellow tail tip*. As pit-vipers they have facial pits that sense heat and are used to detect prey and predators. Male copperheads are larger than females. **Many harmless species in our region are confused with this species but copperheads are the only species with hourglass-shaped crossbands (all other species have blotches that are circular, square, or are widest down the center of the back).**

[from <http://www.snakesofgeorgia.com/copperhead>] The copperhead is the snake that is responsible for most of the venomous snake bites in Georgia. **It gets its name from the coppery color on the top of its head. The copperhead has crossbands that resemble an hourglass when observed from above and hershey kisses when seen from the side.** The copperhead has a tan or light brown skin color with brown or reddish markings across its back. When the copperhead is young it has a brightly colored yellow or green tail that it uses as a lure to attract its prey. The copperhead is known by some as the "highland moccasin" because it is closely related to the cottonmouth (aka water moccasin) and resides away from water on higher ground. Some non-venomous water snakes and young cottonmouths are often mistaken for copperheads. Young cottonmouths can look very much like a copperhead. Even though a bite from a copperhead can be very painful, they are not considered deadly. If bitten by this snake or any other venomous snake, seek medical attention immediately! Remember - just because you may not lose your life doesn't mean you won't lose a finger or hand due to necrosis. *Necrosis - death of tissue caused by hemotoxins in venom.*