

K-State Research and Extension Greenwood County

By: Ben Sims

Agriculture Extension Agent

“Odds of Running into A Venomous Snake”

A springtime heat surge has brought snakes out of hibernation and on the prowl for food after a long winter's rest. While their presence may put some on edge, like myself, there's really not much to worry about. Many present little dangers and can actually do you a favor.

Snakes are anxious to get out of their winter cover, find food, explore the environment, probably look for a mate and find a place to nest. They're active, and people are likely to encounter them. Now I know many of us may be snake-averse. However, of the 42 species of snakes found in Kansas, only seven can deliver venom.

There are two species of copperheads, so that makes it seem like a little greater chance, and we also haven't detected a cottonmouth in the state since the early '90s, so the number of venomous snakes you're likely to encounter is pretty low.

The likelihood of you getting bitten by a snake strongly relates to whether you handle that animal. Over half the people bitten by venomous snakes were handling them, so the ability to identify snakes when up close proves to be valuable.

What are the key characteristics of venomous snakes you might ask? A broad, triangular-shaped head due to the venom sacks located on the backside. Keeled scales, or scales that have a ridge down the center. A secondary opening between their eye and nasal passage, which serves as a heat sensor. Elliptical pupils (shaped like a cat's, for example).

What possible benefit could we have from snakes? Well, for one, they come out of hibernation looking for many prey items to eat. Smaller snakes eat mainly insects, but we also have snakes like the king snake that eat venomous snakes and reptiles, so there are a couple of kinds that do folks a service who don't like to see them.

The vast majority of snakes are going to eat small mammals like native rates and mice and doing us all a favor there, when we have mice getting into the house or maybe feed sacks. To lower the chances of any human-wildlife conflict with snakes, K-State Wildlife Specialist, Drew Ricketts, recommends following the acronym HER:

- Habitat Modification: This step involves removing cover that attracts snakes to a property, such as tall grass, piles of wood, rocks and other things that allow them to hide. If snake-averse, strive to have a more sterile yard with minimal landscaping.
- Exclusion: People can exclude snakes from their homes by completely sealing them off. Snakes can get under loose doors and fit through openings a half-inch tall by an inch or two wide, so cover even the smallest area to achieve maximum exclusion.
- Removal: If a snake ends up in a residence, animal control specialists may deploy glue boards to catch the snake. When snakes enter houses, they tend to follow structures like walls. Thus, areas behind furniture have proven to be the best place for these boards to catch snakes while excluding pets.

Information comes from K-State Wildlife Specialist, Drew Ricketts.