



IS THE ONLY GOOD SNAKE A DEAD SNAKE?

By Chas Moore, Wildlife Biologist

Most people have an innate fear of snakes, which they probably learned at an early age, believing “the only good snake is a dead snake.” They are under the impression that no snake is beneficial, so they instinctively kill every snake they see.

Actually, most snakes are docile, non-aggressive creatures that serve a vital role in nature. All snakes are carnivorous, meaning they eat other smaller animals. They consume a wide range of prey items, depending on the species. Most readily eat rodents such as mice and rats, while others prey on insects. Who doesn’t want fewer mice, rats, and bugs around? If it weren’t for snakes, many areas would be overrun with these pests. Snakes are also beneficial to farmers. They help keep rodent populations down in seed or grain storage areas, barns, gardens, fields, and houses. King snakes even eat other snakes, including venomous species such as rattlesnakes.

Unless they are provoked, snakes in North America will not attack. They usually have to be picked up, cornered, stepped on, or harmed in some way to provoke a strike. The snake’s first response is almost always to flee rather than bite.

Of all the snake species found in S. Carolina, only six are venomous: the coral snake and the five pit vipers which include the timber, eastern diamondback, and pygmy rattlesnakes, the copperhead, and the cottonmouth. Anyone who spends time in the outdoors should learn to identify these snakes and avoid them. Pit vipers have heat-sensing pits on their heads, which help them locate warm-blooded prey such as rodents. They have triangular shaped heads and stout, robust bodies. Non-venomous snakes have heads that are not much larger than the rest of the body.

Coral snakes are small, secretive snakes that live mainly underneath rotting logs and leaf litter, where they search for insects. They rarely are encountered by humans, but are easily identified by their coloration. Coral snakes typically have alter-

nating rings on their body of red, yellow, and black. Old sayings such as “red on yellow will kill a fellow,” “red on black – poison lack,” or “red on black – friend of Jack,” help to distinguish the venomous coral snake from several similarly colored non-venomous species such as the scarlet king snake.

If an unknown species of snake is encountered, it is best to simply leave it alone. People are bitten each year while attempting to kill a snake. This puts the snake in an understandably aggressive mood. Some are bitten when they pick up a snake they think is dead. Of course, no one wants a venomous snake around their house or yard, but if you encounter one in the wild, just leave it alone. Venomous snakes serve an important role in the ecosystem, just like the non-venomous species.

In the rare instance that someone is bitten by a venomous snake, it is important not to panic. Snake bite victims should be taken to a hospital as quickly as possible; most do not die if treated in a reasonable amount of time. In fact, many more people are killed each year in North America from bee stings than from venomous snake bites.

The best way to avoid attracting snakes around homes is to remove anything that may attract prey such as mice, rats, chipmunks, and insects. Remove any wood, lumber, or brush piles from around yards, and keep lawns and fields mowed regularly. Keep fencerows clean of unnecessary brush and tall grass. De-clutter storage areas such as basements, out-buildings, or sheds. Keep livestock feed or grain stored in sealed metal containers. All of this discourages rodents from hanging around.

In the future, don’t be so quick to kill every snake that is encountered. Leave them alone and they will go away. Don’t fear snakes, but respect them and be satisfied knowing they are helping to reduce the numbers of disease-carrying rats and mice, as well as a wide array of insects.☞