

Snakes and Milk

By Frederick Boyce

A myth debunked

When it comes to snakes, misinformation is hardly anything new. Secretive, cryptic and largely silent, snakes are naturally mysterious creatures, and most of what we know about snake behavior, physiology and biology has been learned only recently. Indeed, much is still being learned today. In the meantime, when actual facts are lacking or not readily available, it seems that the natural human tendency is to make them up. And that is precisely what people have been doing with snakes throughout history. Even now, folks in rural country stores would sooner talk about snakes than the weather, and once started will often swap snake stories for the rest of the day.

Perhaps one of the most ancient and widespread pieces of misinformation about snakes is that they crave milk. Snakes are reptiles, not mammals, and since their mothers do not produce milk, they are not adapted to drink it or to make use of it as food. The only time a snake might be induced to drink milk is when it is seriously dehydrated and deprived of water. Whatever the case, there is an ancient tradition running through numerous global cultures and religions that a saucer of milk will lure a snake. There is an unsubstantiated observation (and therefore another possible misconception) that some snakes are attracted to the scent of slightly spoiled milk, perhaps lending a small shred of credibility to this widespread belief; but it bears further investigation. In Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's tale "Adventures of the Speckled Band," the murder weapon is a deadly snake, a so-called "swamp adder," that is lured to and from its lair by a saucer of milk cleverly placed by the murderer. Such a plot point would not have raised many eyebrows in the 19th century, given the overall low levels of snake literacy, but for the Sherlock Holmes fan with any scientific knowledge of snakes, this story requires the maximum suspension of belief in order to be enjoyable.

I can attest that having any first-hand familiarity with snakes can be a serious impediment to the enjoyment of a wide range of popular films and fiction; ignorance is indeed bliss in certain situations. You can be sure that practically anything you may have learned or heard about snakes from anyone other than a herpetologist or knowledgeable enthusiast will likely range from inaccurate to utterly ludicrous. In fact, having worked closely with both snakes and the public for many years, I feel assured that myths, misconceptions and outright falsehoods about snakes far outweigh accurate information among the general populace—and spread far more quickly.

The many snake myths and fables can, however, make for a fascinating study in their own right—a nascent field that one might call "ophio-anthropology" or "anthro-serpentology." The fact that the same stories and myths tend to show up again and again in widely disparate religions and cultures around the globe attests to the remarkably encompassing grasp that serpents have held on the human psyche, evidently predating even the migration of humans from Asia to North America via the Bering land bridge, as the serpentine beliefs of Asia and Europe are often mirrored by those of Native Americans. The snake-milk myths can be traced back at least as far as ancient Egyptian depictions of a cobra drinking from the udder of the goddess Hathor, who was often depicted as a cow.

In the Americas there are about 25 varieties (subspecies) of milksnake, harmless and often colorful relatives of the kingsnakes, that range from southern Canada to Ecuador. The eastern milksnake, which in our state is found only in the mountains, is a relatively drab example of the group, having a grayish body marked by a straight row of plain square blotches down the back that are either brown or reddish, outlined in black. It might well be considered a good example of the "typical" snake.

Since the dawn of agriculture, humans have stockpiled grains and other produce to feed themselves and their livestock, and by doing so have created a perpetual bonanza for rodents and, consequently, for snakes, their most determined predators.



Two scarlet kingsnakes from the Croatan National Forest.—Photo by Fred Boyce

The presence of snakes around barns and byres was mistakenly attributed early on to their fabled fondness for milk, no doubt inspired by the many ancient depictions of snakes drinking from the udders of cows and goats. It is likely that this ancient and erroneous belief did not arise here, but was imported to this continent and transposed onto our native snakes by early settlers from Europe.

The only member of the milksnake clan that is found in the Coastal Plain is the small and very pretty scarlet kingsnake (sometimes called the scarlet milksnake). Famous for being a mimic of the venomous coral snake, the scarlet kingsnake prefers woodland habitats, where it likes to hide under loose pine bark. It is much too small and secretive to have formed a basis for the milksnake myth, and prefers lizards to rodent prey. There are no records of this snake on Bogue Banks, though it is locally common in the Croatan National Forest.

Venomous Reptiles by Sherman A. Minton and Madge Rutherford Minton, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969, was used as a source in writing this article.

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