

Fear Itself

By Frederick Boyce

The fear of snakes, like most other fears, can do so much more harm than snakes themselves. Franklin D. Roosevelt certainly spoke the truth when he said “. . . the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. . . .” As a person who knows firsthand how utterly harmless the great majority of snakes are to people, and how reluctant even venomous snakes are to bite or interact with humans in any way, it truly pains me to see how much harm the fear of these extremely shy and secretive animals can cause. So afflicted are some that they are virtually afraid to venture outdoors due to an unreasoning fear of an animal that they are extremely unlikely to ever catch a glimpse of, much less with which they will ever interact.

The opportunity to observe any wild animal should be viewed as a huge bonus, not a deterrent to anyone’s enjoyment of nature. The condition of ophidiophobia—an abnormal fear of snakes and the most widespread phobia in the world—deserves to be taken very seriously as it can indeed be debilitating. For this fear I blame not snakes, nor those who suffer from it, but rather generations and generations of fear mongers who have deeply inculcated this fear into the human psyche, often for reasons that have less to do with actual snakes than with the desire to control others. Fear can be a powerful tool in the hands of manipulators (and a very lucrative one for writers or movie makers).

People who have an unreasoning fear of snakes usually have had very little firsthand contact with these animals and have often been taught to fear them by others. The true object of their fear is some monstrous and wholly fanciful *notion* of a snake that has taken shape in their minds and which bears only the most superficial resemblance to any actual snakes. This is the only explanation that makes sense to me, as I have spent over half a century in the close company of these remarkable creatures and am certain that there is no quality at all present in these animals that warrants such an almost supernaturally phobic reaction. Only a very small percentage of snakes are dangerously venomous, and almost everywhere are far more scarce than harmless snakes.

Snakes are just animals, much like any others, that are mostly interested in eating, drinking, reproducing and maybe lying around in the sun on a pretty day. One thing that does set them apart from most other terrestrial vertebrates, besides their obvious lack of limbs, is that they lack any sort of voice with which to cry out in pain. Sadly enough, I believe this to be the reason why so many otherwise nice folks who are generally kind to animals and children are capable of inflicting unspeakable acts of cruelty upon even the most harmless and beautiful corn snake. Snakes may not be able to scream or squeal, but believe me, they are extremely sensitive to touch—and to pain.

The fear of snakes does an awful lot of harm, to both people and snakes, and to ecosystems as a whole, since the ongoing, unremitting slaughter of snakes (almost invariably harmless snakes, too) in backyards and on nature trails, and especially on roadways, takes a huge toll on these important predators.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Florence, I was extremely dismayed to see sensationalized and alarmist internet posts and “news” stories warning that rising flood waters were going to wash hordes of venomous snakes out of their wetland habitats, further menacing an already beleaguered populace. The truer menace, however, is the proliferation of such stories themselves (and anyone who has a hand in spreading them). With all the very real and dire problems, hardships and hazards facing residents during such a cataclysmic event, the last thing anyone needs is such unwarranted fear mongering, which is essentially akin to yelling “Fire!” in a crowded theater.

I have not noticed or been made aware of any invasions of large numbers of snakes displaced by storms, and certainly not venomous ones. On the contrary, I have seen relatively few snakes this fall—far fewer than I was seeing last year at this time. As the herpetologist at the NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores, I am usually aware of any unusual variations in local snake activity, and all I have noticed, sadly

enough, is the same continuing decline in their numbers that I have been observing now for over a decade in coastal North Carolina.

Not surprisingly, there has been very little actual research into what snakes do during hurricanes, and most of what I have been able to find is just assumption. We can surmise that they most likely try to take shelter underground, and that in some cases these refugia get flooded out, in which case the snakes must either drown or make a swim for it. All snakes can swim to some degree, so they are unlikely to drown, but any snake that might indeed be displaced by flood waters is going to be extremely disoriented and far more concerned (as anyone would be) with its own safety than with seeking out human victims to bite. That’s just B-movie stuff.

The best policy during such events is to be acutely aware of one’s surroundings (there are also downed power lines, trees and other hazards). Stay out of flood waters, keep hands where you can see them, wear boots and protective clothing, and exercise common sense. If you see a snake, just give it lots of room and wait for it to go away.

For more information on what animals do during hurricanes visit the National Wildlife Federation’s interesting page on this topic at nwf.org/Magazines/National-Wildlife/2018/Aug-Sept/Conservation/Hurricanes.

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A curious cottonmouth keeps its distance —Photo by Fred Boyce

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