

May the Snakes Be With You

By Frederick Boyce

A few things to remember about snakes:

- May is one of the peak months of snake activity as they are moving from winter quarters to their summer foraging grounds.
- Not every snake is a copperhead. The vast majority of snakes are in fact not copperheads.
- Not every snake is even a snake. One of the most commonly seen reptiles on Bogue Banks, especially along the nature trails at the local aquarium, is the eastern glass lizard, a true legless lizard with movable eyelids and external ear openings. Females and subadults are a uniform bronze color, while adult males take on a metallic green hue.
- Around Pine Knoll Shores, the most commonly seen snakes are the northern black racer, the eastern ribbonsnake and the eastern ratsnake. All three are harmless and beneficial.
- Snakes often appear to be much larger than they actually are, especially to people who aren't used to seeing a lot of snakes.
- Black racers are the only large snakes in our area that are entirely black. They are rarely more than four to five feet in length.
- Baby ratsnakes and black racers do not look like the adults. They are gray with a row of dark saddles or blotches running down the back. They will not attain their adult colors until about their third year.



The author gently cradles a very old black racer in Pelletier

—Photo by Amanda Goble

- If you find a small snake inside your house, chances are very good that it's either a baby ratsnake or a racer. These small harmless snakes, along with various lizards, songbirds and other small wildlife, are often caught in those horrible glue traps. Glue traps are inhumane contraptions that should not be bought or used.
- If you see a snake and your first thought is "How in the world did it get there," it's a ratsnake.
- All snakes, even the venomous ones, have key roles to play in the ecosystem and should be left alone. Just as large requiem sharks are indicators of a



Not a snake. A female eastern glass lizard on Roosevelt Boulevard. Yet another good reason not to run over a snake in the road: it may not be a snake.

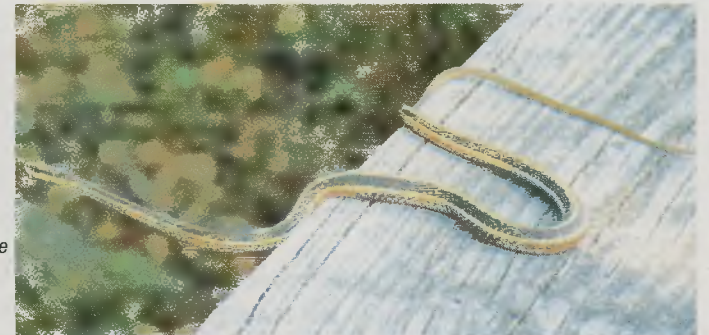
—Photo by Fred Boyce

healthy reef ecosystem in the ocean, venomous snakes, especially rattlesnakes and cottonmouths, are indicators of healthy and relatively untouched wild habitats on land.

- Almost everything you have ever heard about snakes is not true, unless you have been talking to a herpetologist.
- It is impossible for venomous and nonvenomous snakes to breed with each other. It would be like dogs breeding with cats.
- There are no cottonmouths on Bogue Banks. There are cottonmouths on the mainland, in places such as the Croatan Forest, but they prefer quiet back waters as far away from humans as possible.
- Not every snake in the water is a cottonmouth. In fact, snakes in the water are far more likely to be one of our four species of non-venomous water snake.

A curious eastern ribbonsnake hangs out on the boardwalk at the aquarium.

—Photo by Fred Boyce



- Moccasins are a type of footwear associated with Native Americans and are not snakes.
- Snakes have no reason to chase or attack people. Such behaviors would be self-destructive and in direct opposition to their strong instinct for self-preservation.
- Snakes are not only valuable destroyers of rodent and insect pests, they are themselves a favorite food for other predators, including hawks and owls, who will attempt to retrieve dead snakes from roadways and end up being hit by cars themselves.
- Running over a poor helpless snake trying to cross the road is neither an act of heroism nor a community service. It actually causes all sorts of bigger problems, so just don't do it. Drive around it or, better yet, do what I do and stop while it gets across safely, even if it means holding up traffic.
- Having snakes in your yard is good luck. (I may have just made that one up.)
- *Please give snakes a brake!*

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