

A Cornucopia of Corn Snakes

By Frederick Boyce

It is that time of the year when our thoughts turn to corn. Yes, corn, or as it was known to Native Americans, maize—that member of the grass family indigenous to the New World that has been cultivated by humans at least as far back as the Aztecs, and which has become an indispensable source of food, wealth, comfort and well-being for the human race.

But for as long as humans have grown corn and other grains to feed themselves and their livestock, they have also created a bonanza for grain-loving rodents—primarily rats and mice—which make themselves right at home and multiply at an alarming rate, especially in the presence of a large and reliable supply of food. A single naked mole rat in India can store as much as a bushel of grain in its burrow, and guess how many naked mole rats there are in India? It's enough to make one give thanks even for cobras, and the fact that these deadly snakes are frequently tolerated in India's agricultural areas is testament enough to the destructive power of rodents.

It is hardly any surprise then that the rodents would be followed right into our granaries by the things that eat rodents—the ancestor of today's domestic house cat for one, but also snakes. Indeed, the furry, warm and cuddly cat has received a much warmer welcome, but wise farmers in many cultures, especially ones that lack an inherent prejudice against them, have long recognized and appreciated the great value of snakes for rodent control and have protected them from harm. Secretive and unobtrusive, snakes are rarely seen as they go about their single-minded business of hunting prey and, unlike cats, snakes have the ability to pursue rats and mice right into their holes and tunnels, often consuming entire nests of young. Also, unlike cats, snakes never waste time playing with their food, and another big plus is that they are non-allergenic—no one is allergic to snakes.

On our side of the world, the snakes that have taken to hanging around barns and byres and specializing in eating mice and rats tend to be exclusively nonvenomous. They include the very aptly named rat snakes, the very inaptly named milk snakes (the subject of a past column), and the attractively patterned and very colorful corn snake.

A member of the North American rat snake genus *Pantherophis*, the corn snake shares with its fellow rat snakes the quality of being a constrictor, which suffocates prey in the tight coils of a long, muscular body that is shaped like a loaf of bread in cross-section, rounded on top and flat on the belly. The sharply angled edges of the belly allow for better-than-average climbing abilities and, like other rat snakes, corn snakes are expert climbers. They are often called “red rat snakes” and in some rural areas “red oaks.” Corn snakes are native to the southeastern United States where they are most abundant and colorful in the Coastal Plain.

There are also isolated (disjunct) populations in New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia and Kentucky. In NC they are much less common in the Piedmont and western parts of the state, where they usually have a more drab ground-color of plain brown or gray. Near the coast, however, including here on Bogue Banks, some very impressive individuals can be found that are an absolute riot of reds, oranges and yellows, with white and black accents and a typically white (but sometimes orange) belly with an irregular black checkerboard pattern that actually does resemble Indian corn—and is the likely origin of the snake's common name. When feeling threatened, a wild corn snake will often make a small tower of its coils, with its head at the top, brashly displaying the starkly contrasting black-and-white belly to startle or confuse a predator. They will also lunge and strike furiously, and rattle the tail as well, but it is all bluff and bluster. These snakes are perfectly harmless and they know it, so their only way out of a jam is to try to appear as fierce and imposing as possible.

While a frightened juvenile might occasionally go a bit too far and actually nip the hand that tries to pick it up, corn snakes are incapable of inflicting anything more than the most superficial scratches, and they become tame almost instantly

when gently handled. For this reason they have long been popular pet snakes, and I often recommend them as an ideal first snake for a youngster or beginning enthusiast.

In recent decades, people have become increasingly skilled at breeding all kinds of reptiles in captivity, and corn snakes were one of the first species to become established in the trade. These days they are bred to display almost as many genetic mutations or “morphs” (“cultivar” is perhaps the best term) as parakeets or koi fish, ranging from straight albinos to various other genetic combinations, all created by individual breeders who bestow upon them such marketable monikers as “Sunglow Motley” or “Bloodred.” While I do greatly appreciate that such activity goes a long way toward relieving wild populations of the pressure of over-collecting, I don't think that anyone has yet improved one whit upon the original, which is arguably among the most attractive serpents in the entire United States, if not the world. I have seen many beautiful examples crossing rural roads throughout our region, but all too often I see them sadly destroyed, especially on Highway 101 and Down East on Highway 70.

Some claim they are easily confused with copperheads, but I can only see this as being willful ignorance or a lack of attentiveness. I have addressed proper copperhead identification on many previous occasions and don't want to get into yet another comparison here, but to any informed observer a corn snake bears about as much resemblance to a copperhead as a border collie does to a German shepherd.

Corn snakes are commonly seen at Fort Macon State Park, perhaps more often than in the Pine Knoll Shores area, but they have been found from one end of Bogue Banks to the other. The overall impression is of a bright orange, red and yellow snake—if that's what you've seen, then it's a corn snake, and a very good friend indeed.

Frederick Boyce is the staff herpetologist at the NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores.



A corn snake behaving defensively, piling its coils into a tower to appear larger while displaying its checkerboard belly.—Photo by Fred Boyce

In Memoriam

Joan Brown

Almon English

Eugene Walsh