Eye to eye with snakes

by Walter E. Kilroy

Kilroy is vice president of the Massachusetts SPCA in Boston.

Most animal control/shelter personnel become involved with snakes in response to citizen calls -- a terrified resident wants a snake removed from the yard or a snake is presented to the shelter as a stray or unwanted "pet."

If the caller's description positively indicates that the snake is an indigenous and non-poisonous species, the caller should be assured that non-poisonous snakes found in the U.S. are, for all practical purposes, harmless. In the unlikely event of a snake bite, the damage would in most instances be less serious than a cat scratch.

For the person willing to listen, I consider it appropriate to mention that snakes present little nuisance value. They don't bark, chase cars or bicycles, tip over trash, burn shrubs, dig up or raid gardens. In fact, non-poisonous snakes should be among the more welcome of our wildlife visitors, since they feed on animals commonly considered to be pests.

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Here are some suggestions to offer to persons who want to keep snakes away:
1. Keep grass cut short. Snakes are essentially secretive by nature, and tall grass offers them a sense of security.
2. Eliminate piles of rocks and other debris, since they offer snakes a home and a source of mice and insects.
3. Flush the crevices in the fieldstone foundations of older homes with water, and when the snakes have departed, fill the openings with mortar.
4. Treat with moth crystals those areas that are particularly attractive to snakes. A snake's most highly developed sense is that of smell. It relies on constant flicking of the tongue to pick up particles of odor, and the moth crystals are particularly offensive.

The single most important rule of snake identification is that there exists no "rule of thumb." There are both indigenous and exotic species which may appear to the untrained eye to be poisonous but are harmless -- and vice versa.

One often hears that the shape of a snake's head can be used to determine whether it is poisonous; cylindrical indicating non-poisonous, triangular indicating poisonous. However, you have a 50% chance of being wrong with this "rule."

Another misconception is that the shape of a snake's eye pupil is an indicator -- elliptical indicating poisonous, round indicating non-poisonous. But both eye shapes are found in each group.

When dealing with a snake whose identification has not been ascertained, approach and treat it as poisonous. This means with humane sensitivity, respect and caution.

Bear in mind that a snake can generally strike over a distance equal to 2/3 the length of its body. When you look down on a snake, it looks farther away from your feet and legs than it is.

Unnecessary handling of a potentially dangerous snake is always foolish. The most practical and efficient approach is to sweep it with a broom or other implement into a plastic garbage can or other container which can be securely closed.

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SHELTER SENSE is published by The National Humane Education Center, a division of The Humane Society of the United States, 2100 L St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037, (202) 452-1100.

Subscription rate:
six issues—$5.00.
5 or more subscriptions to the same address—$4.00 per subscription.

HSUS Director of Animal Sheltering and Control Phyllis Wright
Editor, SHELTER SENSE Susan Bryn Stauffer


If handling is unavoidable, pin the head gently but firmly with a forked implement. If possible, avoid exerting unnecessarily harsh force on the snake's head. Such force often causes a violent thrashing reaction.

Grasp immediately behind the head, and restrain and support as much of the snake's body as possible to minimize thrashing and potential injury. When capturing a non-poisonous but frightened and aggressive snake, cover it with a blanket or jacket, give it time to settle down, peel the material back until the neck is exposed and grasp as described above.

A warning -- should you be called upon to pick up or receive one of the so-called pit vipers (rattlesnakes, copperheads, or moccasins, etc.) contained in a bag, be mindful of their ability to sense body heat and strike through the bag at the source.

When handling large constrictors such as boa constrictors and pythons, use only that amount of forcible restraint that the animal's temperament and behavior warrant. Unnecessarily harsh grasping and rigid restraint can quickly result in making an otherwise manageable snake unmanageable.

For additional help on snake handling, contact the nearest zoo, museum of natural history or herpetological society.

(Another resource is the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists, National Marine Fisheries Service, National Museum of Natural History, Washington, D.C. 20560. In a future issue of SHELTER SENSE, Kilroy will discuss care and feeding of captured snakes.)