



For Goodness'

# Snake

Caring for the animal kingdom's most misunderstood member

BY CARRIE ALLAN

In his time as an ACO, Bruce Dangerfield has saved hundreds of lives. But not everyone is grateful: Many of the lives he's saved belong to snakes.

Dangerfield is a snake aficionado. When he moved to Florida at age 11, he caught a little one, and went around asking what kind it was, only to have four different neighbors give him four different answers. A visit to his school library found few resources to help, either, and so Dangerfield gleaned what he could from the books there, and started learning more from any source he could find.

The snake capture of his boyhood led him to a lifelong interest in herpetology. As the lone ACO for the city of Vero Beach, Fla., Dangerfield now deals with many different kinds of animals, but few are as feared or misunderstood as snakes. In his classes on hunter education and outdoors living, he's often able to teach people about snakes. When they know a little more about the animals, he says, they become less afraid, and less inclined to freak out and do violence to snakes they encounter.

But many people aren't reachable, he says. They're ignorant about snakes, and perfectly happy to remain so—even in his area, which he describes as “the snake capital of Florida” due to its subtropical climate.

“It's amazing to me that most people don't know much at all even about native snakes,” he says. “If I lived in Australia I'd know about whatever we had, kangaroos or whatever. But people don't care; they don't want to know. They're afraid. The only good snake is a dead snake to them.”

Even Dangerfield's nearest and dearest are somewhat on the fence. To help with the workshops he does, Dangerfield keeps about 20 snakes in the garage, caring for them and using them as teaching aides.

“My wife doesn't go in the garage much,” he says dryly.

## Unreasonable Hiss-teria

Dangerfield's a regular witness to one of the great remaining biases of the animal-loving world. Some people who'd willingly risk life and limb to save a kitten, who'd weep over an injured dog, will happily run over a snake and then back up again to make sure it's adequately squished.

The fear factor around these legless, slithering, mysterious creatures is ancient (thanks, Eve!) and deeply held—and, in some places, reasonable: In India, hundreds of people are killed by venomous snakes every year.

In the U.S., though, the few available statistics indicate that the number of people killed by snakes is likely comparable to those killed by dogs. And yet the sight of an unexpected snake—sunning on a rock, quietly crossing a trail in the woods—is often enough to elicit shrieks few dogs will inspire.

Dangerfield recalls an incident when he was called to remove a snake. “When I got there, there's five deputy cars there and seven deputies, and they all got their lights going.

**HISSEY BIT:** Lots of animal equipment catalogs sell snake “tongs” and hooks for handling; these should be used with caution, says Richard Farinato, former senior director for animal care services at The Humane Society of the United States. Tongs can put too much pressure on the animal's body, and if you use a hook, “you better be ready to put your hands under that body ... because if you just lift him and dangle him, you are going to do damage.” It's best to carry a friendly snake by gently grasping the back of his neck (to control his head) and providing support under the rest of his body. Snakes more than 5 feet long should be carried by draping the snake over the shoulders (not, Farinato emphasizes, around the neck).

And it's about a 16-foot Burmese python, about as big around as a normal man's thigh,” he says. “And I put both hands around its neck, and I said, ‘Can someone kind of pull its tail back so it doesn't wrap around me?’ And here's the answers I got from the deputies: ‘Not me.’ ‘Is it poisonous?’ ‘I ain't touching that damn thing.’”



Animal control officer Bruce Dangerfield captured this red-tailed boa constrictor crawling near a highway south of Vero Beach, Fla., in 2008.

With the help of two women—a neighbor and a cruelty investigator from the local humane society—Dangerfield managed to get the enormous snake most of the way into a body bag from a deputy's cruiser, when “the snake jerked loose and it struck up in the air. It had been in the wild for a while and it was pretty ornery. And it struck up in the air about three or four feet with its mouth open. And the deputies all scattered, and one of them turned and ran so fast into his car that he dented the door of the car.”

A 16-foot python? You can probably understand their fear. But even little garter snakes can freak people out.

Snakes have few of the traits most people seek in their animal companions. They're not fuzzy, they're not cuddly (except for constrictors, of course, and their cuddling can be, shall we say, a little too “clingy” for most people's tastes?).

But they do have a strong fascination factor, and that's kept them in the pet trade over the years. Unprepared snake owners, in turn, have kept snakes coming into animal shelters—sometimes in strange circumstances. A few years back, Loudoun County Animal Care & Control in Virginia got a call from officials at nearby Dulles Airport. A passenger had been stopped at security carrying a wriggling tube sock containing his two pet baby sand boas; he'd been planning to take his snakes on a plane. (Samuel L. Jackson could not be reached for comment.) The shelter took the boas in until they could be transferred to a reptile rescue group.



When carrying a snake, support her body and gently control her head to prevent her from escaping or biting.



If you're not sure how to use them, snake tongs can hurt the animal. Snake hooks (such as the one used by Bruce Dangerfield, above) are somewhat safer, but if you know a snake is friendly and nonvenomous, it's better to pick him up by hand and carry him with good support under his body.

### Coiled Again

The incident—a pet owner unprepared to provide proper care and transport—is typical of reasons Loudoun County takes in snakes, says behavior enrichment coordinator Jenny Swiggart.

“People go to pet stores and see these small snakes, not thinking about what they’re going to be when they grow up,” she says. “I mean, they sell reticulated pythons at pet stores that are the longest snake in the world, and

**HISSY BIT:** That old wives’ tale about a triangular head-shape indicating whether or not a snake is poisonous is not reliable, says Farinato. Learn what snakes native to your area are venomous so that you can identify them. Know which local hospitals have the appropriate antivenoms on hand (not all of them will). If you don’t know what kind of snake you’re dealing with, he says, use extreme caution handling it.

tend to have a reputation for being rather aggressive. And they sell them when they’re a foot long. And people get them home and have to feed mice, but the larger the snake gets, you’re feeding guinea pigs and rabbits. The prey gets bigger as the snake gets bigger. I don’t think people really understand what they’re getting into.”

When your shelter takes in a snake, the most important thing to do is identify its species so that you can be sure it’s not venomous. If it turns out to be, then not only should staff be extremely careful in handling, there may also be local regulations specifying whether or not it can be legally placed for adoption. A local exotics veterinarian should be able to help with identification, if necessary.

A shelter is most likely to see red-tail boas, ball pythons, and Burmese pythons, says Richard Farinato, an exotic animal expert and the former senior director of animal care services for The Humane Society of the United States. There are some regional variations—other shelters have seen corn snakes and king snakes as well. Most pet snakes are captive-bred within the United States—though, he notes, there is still some importation of ball pythons. And, with the exception of poisonous snakes and very large ones, there are few regulations restricting their ownership.

For most shelters—those with limited staff, space, and snake-handling expertise—housing snakes temporarily is the best practice. Working with a good reptile rescue or herpetological society, a shelter can get most snakes into a better situation with serpent experts who’ll

understand the animals’ needs and be prepared to house and care for them.

But happily, snakes’ care needs don’t vary hugely among different species, and so with some basic equipment, you can make them comfy during the time they spend with you.

Shelters that take in snakes “need to keep different-sized aquariums and enclosures on hand, heat lamps, along with full-spectrum UV lights,” says Denise McKay, chair of the Ssafe Haven Society for Reptiles and Amphibians in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Snakes should be housed away from “dogs and cats and other furry things with their funky smells.” This is for the benefit of the snake—who may be stressed by the presence of dogs—and also for the benefit of the other animals, who may not like being stared down and viewed as dinner.

**HISSEY BIT:** Heating rocks are still sold in some pet stores. But if you get one donated, “the best thing you can do ... is cut the cords off and use them as decoration,” says Susan Nowicke, president of the San Diego Herpetological Society. Manufacturers “say they’ve added safeguards to prevent hot spots, and yet we still have animals coming in with burns. Reptiles don’t have any sensation to let them know they’re being burned through their flesh ... they will literally sit on that hot rock and burn themselves all the way through.”



Caring for snakes can present ethical problems for shelters. Many snakes must eat whole prey, which typically means species you may be adopting in the next room. Happily, their slow metabolisms mean that they may not eat at all during a short shelter stay.

Snakes use rough objects to rub against to help them shed. Signs that a snake is about to shed her skin include a bluish tint to her eyes and a “plastic wrap” feel to her skin. She may also not be interested in food.

Snakes can squeeze through small spaces, so “the most important thing is secure containment with a heat source,” says Susan Nowicke, president of the San Diego Herpetological Society, which helps shelters in San Diego County deal with their reptiles. “That can be done with a Rubbermaid tub. It’s contained, it’s secure, it can be easily ventilated, it can have a water source, it can have everything the animal needs. And the animal actually feels more secure in it because it’s dark and quiet, and it doesn’t see all the activity going on around it.”

Snakes will be most comfortable in a warm room, from 78-90 degrees Fahrenheit, but if you can’t provide that, a heating lamp will help them get tropical; the housing space should have warmer and cooler areas so the animal can move to where she’s most comfortable. Make sure that there are no “too hot” surfaces. A good rule of thumb: “If it’s too hot for your hand, it’s too hot for the reptile,” says McKay.

You can put a heating mat under the tub with some ventilation space—a pencil between the mat and the tub floor, for example. Add a towel and a dog’s water dish big enough for the snake to soak in, and make sure the lid is secure and ventilated.

If you can add a large branch or something else to climb on, even better. Sue Farinato, found of the Maryland-based Wildlife Aid Brigade, recently helped a local shelter revamp the cage where two boas had been living rather unhappily. “Using the same cage, but turning it on its end, I rigged some

branches and a shelf inside ...” she says. “They immediately began climbing and draping themselves over the branches.”

### Not-so-Fast Food

If you’re only housing a snake for a few days, he may not need to eat. Unlike gluttonous, warm-blooded cats and dogs and humans, a snake may go weeks between meals. So if you get a snake who doesn’t eat immediately, it’s no reason to panic; if they’re not active and flicking their tongues to scent for food, they may not be hungry. Snakes also take a longer time to adjust to new surroundings, so they may be off their food for a while due to stress.

The food needs of snakes provide further encouragement for shelters to transfer snakes out to rescue groups and herpetological societies that can handle them. Especially for shelters that house and place small mammals, proper snake husbandry can raise some ethical qualms (and perhaps a little case of the shivers). Specifically, many of the snakes in the pet trade eat small mammals (mice, rats, rabbits), and a scenario where a shelter is trying to place live rabbits for adoption in one room while

feeding dead ones to a snake in the next is one of those things that’s bound to make you go “hmmmm.”

You can avoid some of that ethical gray area by only feeding snakes in your care dead prey—that’s the standard for captive snakes anyway, experts say.

**HISSEY BIT:** Is your serpentine visitor shedding? Sometimes it’s hard to tell, but the eyes will become milky, and the “skin will sort of get a melty look when it’s near the final stages,” says Nowicke. “But before that, the best way I can describe it is that the skin will have a dry feel with a little bit of give to it, when normally when you handle a snake the skin is taut and supple. It’s almost like having cheap plastic wrap around the snake.”

THIS PAGE, LEFT: AARON ANSAROV, RIGHT: MARIETJE SHUTTERSTOCK.COM. OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT: SERGEY IVANOV/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM, RIGHT: AARON ANSAROV

## Resources

- Check out a video of Susan Nowicke discussing reptile issues and introducing a friendly boa constrictor named Mack at [youtube.com/watch?v=cOeM3N\\_sL3Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOeM3N_sL3Y).
- Melissa Kaplan's Herp Care Collection at [anapsid.org](https://anapsid.org) provides extensive care information about reptiles, including species-specific care sheets for a number of snakes.
- The Ssafe Haven Society for Reptiles and Amphibians maintains some excellent articles on reptile care at its Petfinder page, [petfinder.com/shelters/NS17.html](https://petfinder.com/shelters/NS17.html).
- The Wildlife Aid Brigade is available to consult on exotics in shelters. Email them at [info@wildlifeaidbrigade.org](mailto:info@wildlifeaidbrigade.org).



A rubber tub can make an excellent temporary holding spot for a snake. Just make sure it has a secure, ventilated lid, and add water and a source of warmth.

"I have no aversion to a snake in the wild killing what it will kill," says Swiggart. "That's nature, it's the wild. But this is not nature—this is a cage." Beyond the icky factor, Swiggart says there are humane problems with feeding live animals. "One of two things can happen. You can have a snake who can miss and [have to] strike a mouse a couple of times. And the death is painful. And vice versa, if you get a snake that is not hungry and you throw in a mouse or a rat or something too large ... there have been instances of the prey injuring or killing the snake."

Swiggart notes that a shelter that needs to house a snake through adoption should not get in the habit of feeding the animal where it lives; the best practice, she says, is to move the animal to another space for its feeding time. Otherwise, she says, they get used to the door opening and food arriving, and that can lead to bites. "Make sure the snake knows you're there, touch them lightly and vibrate the cage, then I will pick them up and move them to another container for feeding." She will use a snake hook and tongs only if the snake is unfriendly.

Some snakes who have eaten live animals in the past—and certain species like ball pythons—may be reluctant to eat dead prey, but they can often be transitioned onto their new chow. Feeder animals can be warmed to standard body temperature, and a snake who is healthy and hungry will usually eat.

## Avoiding Snake Mistakes

Loudoun County keeps its snakes and other reptiles in an isolated area of the shelter, primarily for the animals' comfort, but also to avoid the very phenomenon that leads snakes to end up in shelters in the first place: A person sees a snake, thinks it's cool, and decides to take him home with-

out fully understanding what the animal will need. The shelter will list snakes on its website and respond to adoption inquiries, and Swiggart says this helps cut down on people who might try to adopt on a whim.

Novicke says that she expects anyone who wants to adopt a larger snake to demonstrate experience with that kind of animal, "or they have to show a trend of 'I started with a small snake and went to a bigger one,' so they show they've been building up skills and knowledge and have appropriate caging." Her organization will do home inspections for the more difficult placements.

Not everyone who wants a snake should get one. Like any other animal, snakes take commitment to care for properly, and their nature makes them less of a natural fit into the typical household.

Dangerfield, for his part, is not interested in persuading people that snakes make good pets. He'd be happy enough to convince them not to abuse or kill the animals for no reason. He himself has been bitten five times by venomous snakes—including a bite by a timber rattler that put him in intensive care for three days, where he nearly died.

But he holds no grudges, and continues to try to make the case for treating the animals with compassion and

respect, and for getting over the fear-based reactions that lead to unnecessary conflicts.

"No snake wants to bite a person; they just want to be left alone," he says. "Biting is a snake's last defense. But for some reason, people think it's macho to kill a snake that's practically defenseless against the intelligence of man, and that's what they do every time they see one. They chop it up and they call and say, 'I just killed this big rattlesnake,' and I'll come and it'll be this beautiful pine snake or something else nonvenomous."

It's behavior he's trying to change, one ophidiophobe at a time. **AS**

**HISSEY BIT:** People constantly exaggerate their encounters with snakes, says Bruce Dangerfield, an animal control officer with the city of Vero Beach, Fla. "People call and say, 'It's 8 feet long and as big around as my arm,' and you get there and it's 2 feet long and big around as a pencil," he says. At one of the classes he teaches on outdoorsmanship, he says, he mentioned this tendency to overstate snake size, and a woman asked him later, "The people who exaggerate the length of snakes—they're all men, right?"