

## Misunderstood: the struggle of snakes in Wisconsin

**Sarah Giddings**

After a rough winter, most of Wisconsin and especially the northeastern counties seem to have skipped spring and run right into an unusually hot summer. While uncomfortable for some of the human species, the weather has been ideal for insects, reptiles and many other wild creatures.

Snakes are one species that has been having a good summer.

The good news is, in our area, and most of our state, there are no dangerous or poisonous snakes. The only two poisonous species are very rare, the timber rattlesnake and the Massasauga, and they live only in the far western part of the state.

In Wisconsin, there are 21 species of snakes, 14 are considered "rare" and listed as endangered, threatened or special concern. Only seven are found here in the northeast counties. Small snakes in the area are the common gartersnake, DeKay's brownsnake, red-bellied

snake, and the smooth greensnake. Medium-sized snakes you may encounter in the Northwoods are eastern foxsnake (also called pine snake), eastern hog-nosed snake, and common watersnake.

Some people call the fox snake a "pine snake" in our state. However, technically there is no such thing as a pine snake in Wisconsin.

Some of these harmless snakes will mimic the habits and behaviors of poisonous rattlers and other varieties in order to scare off potential predators, human beings included. The foxsnake, for example will shake the tip of its tail so rapidly that it produces a "rattle" sound, though it does not have an actual rattle. While fox snakes will strike if threatened, and can bite, they are not poisonous. A fox snake will not bite unless significantly provoked.

The eastern hog-nosed snake will puff up its body to make itself appear larger. If this doesn't work,

this snake will simply roll over and play dead.

Again, these are all harmless. In fact, they are beneficial.

Snakes consume a



Sarah Giddings  
A foxsnake found in Florence County in late June.

large number of harmful rodents, such as voles,

mice, rats, chipmunks and others. As the old saying goes, "a snake in the barn is a good thing."

Some of the smaller species of snakes also eat insects and other pests such as beetles, slugs and earwigs.

While there are many benefits to having snakes around, not everyone is going to be convinced to keep them around. Here are some tips from snake removal experts to non-violently keep snakes at bay.

The easiest way to keep a snake away from your home or property is to make the area unattractive to the reptile. Snakes will look for areas favorable to continued survival, with sufficient shelter and food.

Many of the landscaping items we like to use as homeowners are also ideal objects for snakes to use for shelter. Or, if not providing shelter to the snake, the rock walls and thick shrubbery can provide a home to a variety of snake prey animals such as mice, frogs, chipmunks, and a host of insects.

Long grass, overgrown gardens and hedges are ideal places for ambush predators like snakes to live.

Choose mortared rock walls instead of free stacked stone; use crushed rock for ground cover instead of mulch; keep the base of plants weed-free and open. Properly care for your yard and any border areas that need separate trimming. If you burn wood, consider stacking your wood at least a foot off the ground to discourage a snake from using the area for shelter.

Be sure to check foundations of the buildings and fill any holes or gaps.

There are no chemical repellents for snakes. Scent does work to lure snakes to a location, a trick that can be used for trapping and removal.

Turkeys are surprisingly adept at locating and grouping around a snake. They can harass a snake enough to encourage it to move away from the immediate area. Dogs and cats will hunt snakes but should

never be used in poisonous snake prevention.

Owls and various birds of prey will hunt snakes, though obviously are not a consistent source of prevention.

For snakes that are climbing into bird houses, sticky substances added to the trunks of trees can be a practical method to prevent devastation to the song bird population. Sticky substances are only useful in small areas and are not useful for entire property protection.

No matter what techniques you use to try to keep snakes away, the method of prevention is simply a matter of being proactive. By being aware of the habitat your yard provides, you will be able to prevent snakes from becoming a problem.

Before you scream and try to kill a snake, take a deep breath and remember that it is not there to hurt you and it is eating pesky rodents and insects. There are many snake removal resources online, both do-it-yourself or professional. You can also contact your local DNR biologist for tips.

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