

## News from the Watershed

### The serpents of Highlands County

Few things strike fear in the hearts of most people than the sight of a slithering snake crossing their path. Certainly these creatures have a bad reputation. It seems the general feeling is one of disgust, fear and even hatred.

But let's keep an open mind and take a look at what these long, sinewy creatures truly represent.

We don't know a lot about snakes in their natural habitat. Most of what we do know has been learned from snakes in captivity. One fact is for sure – all snakes are predators.

They dine on smaller animals including rats and mice. Now that may sound disgusting, but by munching on these vermin, they're doing us a big favor by reducing the possibility of disease. Remember all the plagues way back when? Snakes have saved us a lot of heartache just by their diet. Chalk one up for the reptile!

Even though nature is a glorious thing, surely there are certain critters out there that cause us to quiver and shake. No matter what it is you fear, remember every creature, plant, and living thing is here for a balancing purpose. It's the domino effect – when one single plant or animal disappears, many others are sure to follow.

Almost everyone enjoys watching a beautiful Red Shouldered Hawk in flight, or what about the wide eyed barred owl perched on a limb? Snakes are a favorite meal for these birds of prey. Think how these magnificent birds would fare if all snakes were gone!

Usually these reptiles live in dark places, such as under rocks or dead trees, under forest litter such as leaves, twigs, and vegetation. Some like to make their homes in underground burrows. They are shy and secretive creatures and they try to stay as far away from us as they can.

Snakes use sense of smell, sight, hearing and touch. Their sense of smell is not like most vertebrates. They use their tongues to pick up particles in the air and when they draw their tongue back in their mouth, it contacts a sensory lining which is connected to the brain by olfactory nerves.

Their hearing is also unique. Snakes rely mainly on vibration. Many folks believe snakes are blind; not so. They have a wide field of vision but don't see objects clearly.

So you see, these reptiles are not only helpful to mankind, but there is an infinite amount to be learned from them. If we just take time to study them, we may find a genuine feeling of fascination replacing the fear.

Most snakes are harmless. Out of the county's 54 varieties of snakes, only four are poisonous. So chances are that even if you see one of these shy creatures, it won't hurt you. It will probably be terrified of you and crawl away and hide.

The poisonous snakes that reside in Highlands County include the Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake, Pigmy Rattlesnake, Cottonmouth Water Moccasin and the Coral Snake. In northern Florida (cooler climate) add to the list the Copperhead and Canebrake Rattlesnake. These venomous snakes are fairly

easy to identify and can be recognized once their characteristics are learned. In addition, once you discover their habits, you will know what to watch out for. So don't let these legless lizards keep you out of the woods. Mother Nature has a delicate balance and everyone can play an important role in keeping the natural process intact.

Snake facts:

**What to do if you see a snake:**

Stand back and observe; snakes don't purposefully position themselves to frighten you. They want to avoid an encounter. Remember – there is no good reason to kill a snake except if there is some danger to you or your loved ones. Snakes generally will not bite unless approached –they will defend themselves if attacked or approached.

**Snake identification:**

**Pit Vipers (Rattlesnakes, Cottonmouth)**

- **Vertical pupil**
- **Heat-seeking pit between eye and nostril**
- **Has moveable front fangs that extend when striking**
- **Large venom sacks in back of upper jaw giving the head a triangular shape**

**Coral Snake**

- **Round pupil**
- **Short, fixed position front fangs**
- **Venom glands are not large and pronounced, head is rounded**
- **Red touch yellow-kill a fellow, red touch black – venom lack (in other words with the poisonous coral snake the red and yellow stripes will be next to each other. King snakes have similar coloration, but are harmless.)**

For more information about wildlife and the environment, please feel free to contact our office at (863) 402-6545 or visit our website at <http://www.highlandsswcd.org/>.