VIRGINIA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE

WILDLIFE DAMAGE CONTROL IN VIRGINIA

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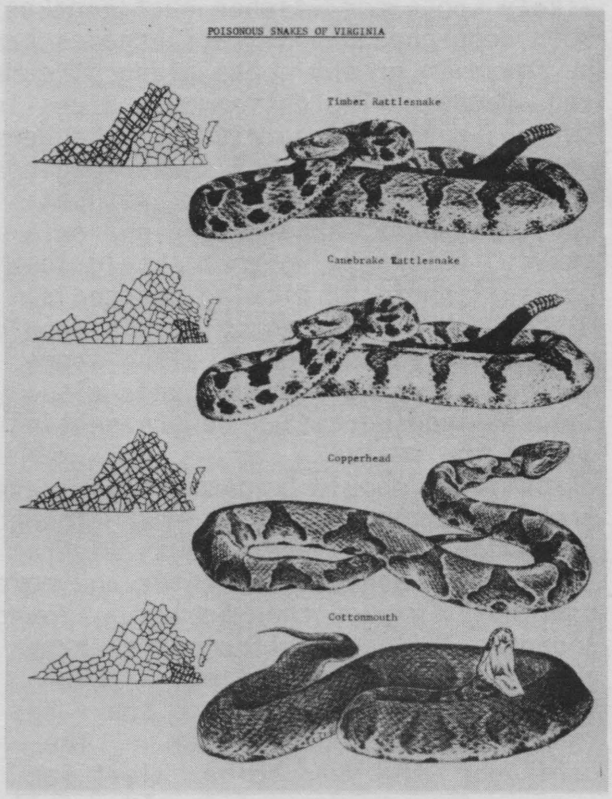
SNAKES

In Virginia there are 37 kinds of snakes, but only 4 of them are poisonous. Even poisonous snakes are valuable parts of the natural world. For reasons beyond the scope of this publication, snakes are feared by many people and beneficial snakes are killed needlessly each year. However, poisonous snakes should be eliminated from home grounds and other areas used often by people. Non-poisonous snakes that enter the home grounds can be caught and released some distance from the home. Homes can be made snake-proof and yards can be made unattractive to snakes. In this publication we cover how to: (1) identify the poisonous snakes; (2) reduce the chances of being bitten by poisonous snakes; (3) safely kill poisonous snakes; (4) treat for snakebite; (5) capture and move non-poisonous snakes; (6) prevent snakes from entering the home; and (7) make yards and recreation areas heavily used by people less attractive to snakes.

POISONOUS OR NON-POISONOUS?

The poisonous snakes of Virginia are shown in the illustration. Notice the relatively large, angular head, ridges over the eyes, and prominent, dark markings across the backs of these snakes. As adults, the timber rattlesnake and the canebrake rattler have rattles, but young rattlesnakes have only one button at the tips of their tails. Timber rattlesnakes range from the West Virginia line across the Blue Ridge. Canebrake rattlesnakes live in swampy areas in southeast Virginia. Copperheads are found in all Virginia counties. The saddles on the back of the copperhead are outlined in rich brown and the top of the head of this snake is rusty-



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brown. The cottonmouth lives in swamp habitats in the Dismal Swamp area, along the James River to the vicinity of Petersburg, and in other locations in southeast Virginia. This dark, greyish-brown snake displays the white inside of its mouth when threatened.

More detailed information on the identification, biology, and ecology of snakes is available from the references listed at the end of this publication.

HOW TO AVOID POISONOUS SNAKES

Here are some ways to avoid being bitten by poisonous snakes. Wear heavy leather or rubber boots when working or recreating in good snake habitat. Poisonous snakes prefer habitats with cover at the ground level, abundant small mammals, birds and other animals, and water or damp areas.

In the mountains, rocky outbreaks with thick brush and timber blowdowns are likely spots for timber rattlesnakes. Both copperheads and rattlesnakes can be found in brushy areas along streams and swamps. The cottonmouth lives in swamps, marshes, and rivers. Loggers wearing heavy boots and snake leggings can go about their work without constant worry about stepping on a snake, but woods workers should look carefully before picking up tools. Fishermen in southeast Virginia should check out boats docked along shore before stepping inside and also inspect landing areas before getting out of the boat.

Children should be warned to leave pretty, little snakes alone. Young poisonous snakes are about eight inches long and are brighter and more distinctly marked than adults. Young copperheads and cottonmouths have greenish-yellow tail tips. Even though little, the newborn snake has functional fangs and venom. The period of the year to be alert for them is from August until cold, fall nights are frequent.

Another precaution is to be alert for poisonous snakes whenever working around stacks of lumber, piles of firewood, junk piles, or accumulations of materials suitable for a daytime hiding spot. Poisonous snakes do most of their hunting at night and seek cover during the day.

Follow these reasonable precautions and reduce the chances of being bitten by poisonous snakes.

HANDLING AND KILLING POISONOUS SNAKES

Most people will not hesitate to kill a poisonous snake found near their home or camp, but for those who insist on capture and removal of snakes here are some ways to proceed. No way to handle a poisonous snake is without risk! A snake can strike from one-third to one-half its body length in any direction. When snakes are warm, they can strike with blinding speed--they just look sluggish. Professional snake handlers respect poisonous snakes and amateurs because they lack the know-how and the equipment and first aid supplies of the pros, are advised to resist the temptation to capture them.

Killing poisonous snakes with a long-handled shovel or hoe is much safer than capturing and moving them. But beware of the head of a just killed snake. Reflex action can cause the jaws to snap on a careless finger. Also, do not handle or touch the fangs with the fingers. They are needle-sharp and may be dripping with venom.

FIRST AID FOR SNAKEBITES

Do not panic when bitten or when a child or anyone else has been bitten. Raising the pulse rate of the victim just increases the pain and suffering. Nationally, only 20 people die annually from snakebite. Compare this level to that for highway fatalities, and you will realize that snakebite is rarely a life or death matter, especially when medical attention can be obtained within 30 minutes.

Get the victim to a hospital right away. Pack the struck area with cold, wet cloths, but do not freeze the

tissue by direct applications of ice.

If the victim cannot be driven to a hospital within 30, minutes and you are absolutely certain it is a poisonous snakebite, apply the cut-and-suck first-aid treatment. Be sure to positively identify two puncture wounds before cutting the victim. The bite of a non-poisonous snake will look like two, opposing horseshoes by comparison. Stay calm. Apply a constriction band or ligature between the bite and the heart. Release the tension for 90 seconds each 10 minutes--(keep a time schedule on paper if possible). Make a longitudinal cut of 1/8 to 1/4 inch long and 1/4 inch deep through the bite with a sterile blade, but do not cut through blood vessels and do not make an X. Apply suction with a rubber bulb or your mouth, if you have no open sores. Then get the victim to a hospital as soon as possible.

If the bite is from a non-poisonous snake, treat the wound with soap and water followed by an antiseptic. If an infection develops, go to a doctor.

CAPTURE AND REMOVAL OF NON-POISONOUS SNAKES

Most courageous homeowners can remove a harmless snake without a wasteful killing. A hoe, rake, or shovel can be used to lift the snake and carry it outside. Most snakes will concentrate on maintaining balance on the implement to keep from falling.

A broom can be used to simply sweep small snakes into a box or pail for removal.

Another capture method which can be used on any size non-poisonous snake involves a pillow case or feed sack. Simply place your arm in the sack, grab the snake near its head, pull the sack inside-out around the snake, and tie or knot the sack. The sack protects your arm from attempted bites during this whole procedure. Take the snake several hundred yards or so away from the home and release it in a field or woods area.

SNAKE-PROOFING YOUR HOME

A home will be free of snakes if it is tightly constructed with a solid foundation extending into the ground completely around the house, snug doors and windows and screened vents in the attic for the clothes dryer and other exit holes for pipes. Making older homes snake proof can require extensive patching of rock foundations and chimneys with concrete, screening off and otherwise blocking all holes in and between the walls, floors, and attic, and repair or replacement of windows and doors. Some snakes can gain access to attics from overhanging tree limbs, so the carpentry work must be complete.

REDUCING SNAKE POPULATIONS AROUND HOMES AND RECREATION AREAS

There are no approved pesticides for snakes, and there is little scientific evidence in support of repellants. Although burnt lime, sulfur, and mothballs are rumored to repell snakes, we recommend efforts to reduce the attractiveness of areas by taking away key habitat requirements -- food and cover. The exception to this generalization is that snakes will avoid crossing extremely sticky substances. The product "Tack Trap" when applied to poles supporting wood duck nest boxes prevented nest predation by snakes. The product is produced by Animal Repellants Inc., Griffin, GA. Presumably, this sticky material could be applied on foundations and wooden structures that snakes are suspected of using to get into buildings. This application has not been tested scientifically.

Many snakes, including poisonous snakes, prefer places where mice and cover are abundant. Lawns that are mowed frequently have neither mice nor cover. Rank weeds and grass growth along a hedge, fence, or around the foundation of buildings are an invitation to both rodents and snakes. So are piles of junk, boards, firewood, and loosely constructed

buildings. If it would cost too much to reconstruct or rodent- and snake-proof the building, then the next best way to reduce snakes is to trap the rodents and establish anticoagulent poison bait stations. Trapping and poisoning should be done out of the public view and out of reach of children.

Black rat snakes are by far the most likely species to enter homes. These snakes may be found around well-kept home grounds if there are large shade trees in the yard. Old trees with hollows and piles of mulch or rotting wood are selected as nests by rat snakes. They lay 5 to 25 eggs in early summer that hatch in late summer. Young black rat snakes have distinct dark grayish-black markings on their ash-gray backs. These young frequently are mistaken for copperheads or young timber rattlesnakes. They are distinguished from poisonous snakes by their protruding round eyes, round pupils, and the black and white checkerboard pattern on their bellies.

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