

Conservation Matters

A monthly column focused on conservation education, as the result of collaboration among several area conservation commissions and organizations. If your town's commission or conservation organization would like to contribute articles, please contact Jessica Tabolt Halm jess_tabolt@hotmail.com

Title:



New Hampshire Snakes

Written by: Steve Whitman, Alexandria Conservation Commission

You'll be hard pressed to find people who "like snakes"; most people tolerate them, and some are afraid of them. I'm not a herpetologist or an authority on snakes; however, I do find them interesting, and champion their protection whenever possible. Overall, snakes are poorly studied and basic life history information is lacking, which no doubt contributes to people's fear of snakes. According to the New Hampshire Fish & Game, there are eleven species of snakes that are native to New Hampshire; only one, the timber rattlesnake, is venomous. Many of these species, such as the garter snake are common and widespread across the state. Other species like the timber rattlesnake, eastern hognose snake, and the northern black racer are extremely rare and are considered either state threatened or endangered, and are legally protected. The New Hampshire Fish & Game maintains a database of all reptile and amphibian reports through its Reptile and Amphibian Reporting Program (RAARP). For information about this program and how you can participate, visit The New Hampshire Fish & Game website.

Snakes have generated more than their fair share of myths, many having their roots seeded in Native American tribal folk lore and legend; among them being: snakes are aggressive and will attack people whenever given the opportunity; snakes chase people; and one of my favorites, milk snakes attach themselves to cows and 'milk' the cow. These myths may bring a smile to your face; however, to those who may not understand a snake's nature, these may appear plausible. If a snake [or any wild creature for that matter] feels threatened, it will become aggressive and may 'strike' or appear to 'charge' at you if you are blocking its escape route [a snake's striking distance is equivalent to about 1/2 to 2/3 of its body length]; but unless you taunt it, a snake will most likely try to get away from you, not attack you. The milk snake, often mistaken for the venomous copperhead which is not a NH species, is frequently seen around barns where its primary diet of mice and other small rodents [not cows] is readily available. It is possible that cows have been bitten by milk snakes as the result of being cornered or stepped on, which further fueled the myth, but other than in self-defense, there is no reason any snake found in New Hampshire would bite a cow.

There is no need to kill a snake. The truth is, all snakes would rather avoid people and merely go peacefully about their business. They play an important role in our ecosystems by helping to maintain a balance between the competing species upon which they prey, as well as providing a critical link in the food chain for those species that prey upon them, such as raptors, fox, bobcats, coyotes, and even other snakes. Should you come upon a snake while out hiking or in your yard this summer, please give it space and the opportunity to crawl away; or merely go around it without disturbing it. Trust me; it won't attack you or follow you into your house, and you will have done your part to help protect our New Hampshire wildlife.