

Can you identify a poisonous snake by the shape of its head?

No? Well then Lake James State Park may be able to help

By LEA BEAZLEY
For The News Herald

A TENTION: Parents with children out of school, daycare groups and summer campers, reptile enthusiasts, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts! Lake James State Park is the place to be on Monday, July 31.

Why? Carlton Burke of Carolina Mountain "Snakes — Fact and Folklore" beginning at 2 p.m. Naturalists will be giving a snake program called and many live snakes will be available for participants to learn about, look at and handle.

Do snakes swallow their young to protect them? Can you identify a poisonous snake by the shape of its head? Which snakes live in the North Carolina mountains? Are snakes slimy? Do all snakes lay eggs? Is there such a thing as a hoop snake? Are snakes with blunt tails really poisonous? Why do snakes shed their skin?

These are just few of the questions that will be answered during Burke's informative, fun program.

Participants will see both common and rare snakes of North Carolina. Some of the nonpoisonous snakes Burke will bring to the program are the garter, hognose, black rat, milk, kingsnake, green, corn, and pine snake. The two poisonous species he'll have on hand are the copperhead and timber rattlesnake. The poisonous snakes will remain in locked cases.

Contrary to popular belief, said Burke, the copperhead and timber rattlesnake are the only two poisonous snakes inhabiting western North Carolina. "Many people think the water moccasin exists in the mountains. Not so. What these people are probably seeing is a water snake or copperhead."

Burke works as the curator of exhibits at the Western North Carolina Nature Center in Asheville. The center is a living museum where live species of plants and animals native to the Southern Appalachian Mountains are exhibited.

In addition to and completely separate from this position, Burke started his Carolina Mountain Naturists business about five years ago because

"So many groups want someone who can bring the animals to them," he said. Carolina Mountain Naturists, based in the Asheville/Hendersonville area, does just that. Upon request, Burke carries

his animals to schools, scout meetings, summer camps, and other requested sites, entertaining people of all ages while teaching them about wildlife and nature.

He has an extensive background in natural history and can meet just about any type of program request, but a few of the specific programs he offers include:

• Terrific Turtles! — from the fearsome snapping turtles, a look at the habits and habitats of these amazing shelled wonders.

• Hunters in the Sky — a program on birds of prey where you'll meet some live raptors and learn about their struggle to survive in our changing world.

• In Cold Blood — a close-up look at lizards, snakes and turtles.

• Slippin' and a Slidin' — an exploration of the wide world of amphibians from frogs to salamanders.

• Appalachian WILD — a program on the diversity of wildlife inhabiting the Southern Appalachian's high ridges and rugged forested slopes, low valleys and wetland bogs, rivers and streams.

• Hazards in the Outdoors — plants and animals that can be harmful to people such as bees and other stinging insects, venomous snakes and spiders, ticks, and poisonous plants and mushrooms.

He also offers a program on honeybees where participants peek into a working observation hive and taste freshly produced honey, programs on insects and butterflies, and a spider presentation using live exotic tarantulas and North Carolina native backyard varieties. In addition, he offers workshops where participants build bluebird boxes, kestrel and screech owl nest boxes, bat houses, and birdfeeders.

The fee for his programs ranges from \$110 to \$140 depending on the type of program requested and work involved in setting up and presenting it.

In addition, he charges a mileage fee for any program outside a 25-mile radius of his home. He is willing to travel, however, and has given programs as far east as Charlotte and Statesville. Contact his office at (704) 891-5169 to make program requests.

Burke is a licensed wildlife rehabilitator and educator. Many of the animals he possesses were injured at some point and are now unreleasable for one reason or another (for example, they may be unable to fly, blind in one eye, or imprinted on humans). Others were spared from death (a snake, for example, taken from a frightened person's property), or born and raised in captivity.

Burke has a degree in Fish and Wildlife Management from Haywood Technical College in Clyde and has been a naturalist for more than 15 years. "I really got into snakes when I took a tour of a zoo as a boy," he said. "It was then that I learned that snakes weren't the slimy creatures we think they are."

After that he started turning over every rock he came across in search of snakes and became more and more interested in every aspect of nature. He feels fortunate that he is able to do what he loves most for a living.

In addition to providing a variety of educational and entertaining programs like this one, Lake James State Park is a wonderful place for picnicking, swimming, camping, boating, and hiking. So come out and enjoy the park for the day on Monday, July 31 and then stick around for Burke's free "Snakes — Fact and Folklore" program.

The park is only a short drive from the Morganton area. (Contact the park at 704-652-5047 for directions or more information.)

(Lea Beazley is an education and information specialist with the N.C. State Parks system. She is based at Duke Power State Park near Troutman.)

