

Fear Less and Learn More: A Guide to Snakes

Friends of Lower Haw River, Inc. (FLOHA) is an all-volunteer nonprofit organization that provides stewardship, education, and advocacy for the Lower Haw River State Natural Area and the Chatham County segment of the Haw River State Trail, both part of the NC State Parks system.

The Lower Haw River State Natural Area is a great place to observe snakes and understand how they should be treated. Resources for North Carolina snake information include the Amphibians and Reptiles of North Carolina, the NC Natural Heritage Program NatureServe Explorer, the NC State Parks Natural Resources Inventory Database, and the NC Biodiversity Project.

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Snakes are one of the most misunderstood creatures in the animal kingdom and are often met with fear and unnecessary hostility. However, these remarkable reptiles are crucial in maintaining ecological balance within nature. This field guide is designed to help people appreciate the beauty and importance of snakes while providing essential knowledge on identifying venomous and non-venomous species. Understanding the difference between harmless and potentially dangerous snakes, learning their behaviors, and knowing how to react when encountering them, we can coexist peacefully with these fascinating creatures.

What People Commonly Get Wrong About Snakes

Myth: Every snake is a threat and should be feared.

Truth: Most snakes are non-venomous and not aggressive.

Myth: Snakes will chase you.

Truth: Snakes do not chase humans. If a snake appears to be following you, it is likely trying to escape a nearby hiding place.

Myth: All venomous snakes have rattles.

Truth: Only rattlesnakes have rattles. Many venomous snakes, like copperheads or cottonmouths, lack this feature.

Myth: Snakes are aggressive and will attack unprovoked.

Truth: Snakes strike ONLY as a last resort, usually when they feel threatened or cornered.

Myth: Baby snakes are more dangerous than adults.

Truth: While baby venomous snakes can bite, they are not more dangerous because adult snakes can deliver larger doses of venom and be more accurate in controlling it.

What to Do When You Encounter a Snake

- 1 Stay calm and do not approach.
- 2 Observe from a safe distance.
- 3 Do NOT attempt to handle or harm the snake.
- 4 If bitten by a non-venomous snake, simply wash the area.
- 5 If bitten by a venomous snake, seek medical attention immediately.

How to identify whether or not a snake is venomous?

More specific ID characteristics depend on species; Look at the next page for species-dependent identification.

	Venomous Snakes	Non-venomous Snakes
Eyes:	Vertical pupils	Round pupils
Color & Pattern:	Often have distinct, repeated patterns, depending on species.	Usually have less defined or more blotchy patterns, but may mimic venomous patterns.
Facial Markings:	Many have heat-sensing pits between the eyes and nostrils and often have facial stripes and markings.	Lack heat pits; facial markings vary or may be absent completely.

Snakes of the Lower Haw River State Natural Area



Northern Water Snake

Nerodia sipedon

Non-venomous

Identification: Brown, gray, or reddish with dark bands. Thick-bodied with rough-textured scales.

Behavior: Found in or near water and overhanging limbs of trees.

Habitat: Lakes, rivers, ponds, wetlands.



Rough Earth Snake

Haldea striatula

Non-venomous

Identification: Small, slender brown or gray snake with pointed snout, has no distinct markings.

Behavior: Burrows and is rarely seen above ground, except for after heavy rains.

Habitat: Forest floors, gardens, under leaf litter.



Rough Green Snake

Opheodrys aestivus

Non-venomous

Identification: Bright green body with slender shape, white or yellow belly.

Behavior: Tree-dwelling and rarely seen on the ground.

Habitat: Bushes, trees, and grassy areas near water.



Red -Bellied Snake

Storeria occipitomaculata

Non-venomous

Identification: Small, slender snake with bright red or orange belly.

Behavior: Very shy and spends most of its time hidden; rolls into a tight coil when threatened.

Habitat: Woodlands, fields, and gardens.



Worm Snake

Carphophis amoenus

Non-venomous

Identification: Small, shiny brown or pinkish body with pink belly.

Behavior: Burrows and is harmless, rarely bites. A shy and secretive species that is well-adapted to life under soil.

Habitat: Moist forests, under logs, underground.



Queen Snake

Regina septemvittata

Non-venomous

Identification: Olive-brown or gray body with yellowish stripes, cream or yellow belly with dark stripes.

Behavior: An excellent swimmer; often seen basking on rocks or low branches overhanging water.

Habitat: Fast-moving streams and rivers.



Brown Snake

Storeria dekayi

Non-venomous

Identification: Small brown or gray snake with row of tiny dark spots on its back.

Behavior: Prefers crawling under leaf litter, rocks, logs, or debris. Often sheltered with others and is more active in cooler weather.

Habitat: Gardens, forests, urban areas under debris.



Eastern Kingsnake

Lampropeltis getula

Non-venomous

Identification: Glossy black body with white or yellow bands.

Behavior: Powerful constrictor that eats venomous snakes. Very strong and can overpower large prey.

Habitat: Woodlands, fields, and wetlands.



Copperhead Snake

Agkistrodon contortrix

Venomous

Identification: Light brown/tan with hour-glass shaped dark bands. Has slit-like pupils. Pattern viewed from side resembles a chocolate "kiss".

Behavior: Relies on camouflage and stays motionless when approached.

Habitat: Forests, rocky hillsides, and near water sources.