

# SNAKES

OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

By BRENDAN CLIFFORD



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*Smooth green snake  
hatching from an egg.*

## *Secretive, slithery and misunderstood, snakes are a vital link in the web of life*

**F**ear of snakes — scientists call it “ophidiophobia” and say that this common fear may be deeply rooted in human evolution (and perhaps that infamous scene from “Raiders of the Lost Ark”). It’s too bad, because “snakeophobia” causes people to revile and undervalue snakes more than any other wildlife. Granted, snakes aren’t cuddly, and they’re hard to get to know. But despite what many people think, snakes are animals that should be appreciated for their uniqueness and their contributions to the ecosystem. If you haven’t had a chance to discover the diverse snakes of New Hampshire, read on to learn why these unique animals are important and what you can do to help protect them.

### **GARTERS IN THE GARDEN**

New Hampshire has 11 native snake species. Throughout the state, these snakes range from very common to rare and occupy a variety of different habitats. Some of the most common species in New Hampshire include garter snakes, brown snakes and water snakes. Found in almost every town, these species are common because they are “habitat generalists,” meaning they can live in a variety of different habitats. Other snakes — like black racers, hognose snakes and timber rattlesnakes — are less common or rare because they have special habitat needs that determine their presence and abundance.

Our snakes have varying body sizes and color patterns that make each species unique. Some — like the milk snake, water snake and hognose snake — are strongly patterned, whereas others, like the smooth green snake, ringneck snake and ribbon snake, are marked with bright colors. Each has adapted to particular habitat types based on their food preferences and movement patterns. Our common species, like garter snakes and redbelly snakes, thrive in small habitat patches because they don’t need to move very far throughout their lives to find plenty of food (insects and small vertebrates) and mates. The more uncommon species are either long-distance travelers or require very particular habitats to find their prey. Racers and hognose snakes are not very common, because their movement often brings them into contact with people; these encounters some-

times trigger people’s fear of large snakes, the end result being a dead snake.

### **LINK IN THE FOOD CHAIN**

You might not realize it, but snakes play an important role in the ecosystem. Snakes and all other wildlife are part of the food chain that maintains wildlife diversity and balance. Also, many snakes eat other animals that humans may consider nuisances. For example, rodents and insects that may carry diseases are an important part of the diets of many New Hampshire snakes. In turn, snakes may serve as a food source for animals like hawks, foxes and bobcats.

Like almost all wildlife, the primary threat that snakes face is the loss of their habitat. The snakes most affected by habitat loss are listed in the New Hampshire Wildlife Action Plan (see the Fish and Game website for details, [www.WildNH.com](http://www.WildNH.com)). Smooth green snakes, black racers, ribbon snakes, hognose snakes and timber rattlesnakes all require either specialized habitats (which, unluckily, tend to be those most easily developed); or very large habitats, which continue to be fragmented by roads and houses as New Hampshire’s communities

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*New Hampshire’s timber rattlesnakes are an extremely rare endangered species. Though the state’s only venomous snake, they are usually mild-tempered.*

# SNAKES YOU MAY ENCOUNTER



## GARTER SNAKE

If you find a snake in your yard, there's a good chance it's a garter snake. As New Hampshire's most common snake, they can be found almost anywhere including forests, fields, backyards, gardens, and even in cities. Their diet consists mainly of earthworms and amphibians.

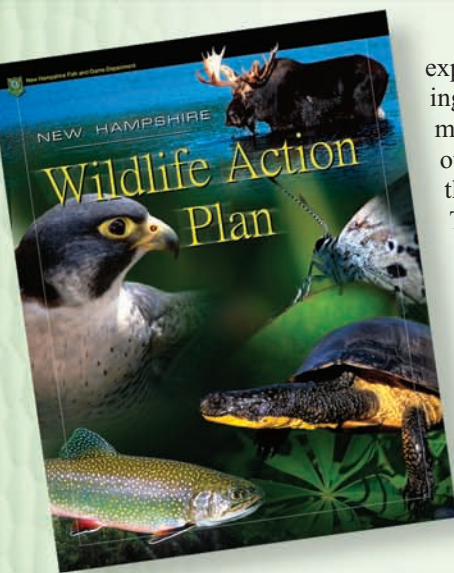


## NORTHERN BROWN SNAKE

The brown snake, like the garter snake, may be found in a variety of places such as woodlands, fields, marshes, trash piles and even city lots. They typically hide under rocks, logs, leaves or brush piles during the day and are active at night searching for insects, snails and earthworms.

## BLACK RACER

The black racer is a long and thin, glossy-black snake with a whitish chin that is often seen "racing" away when encountered. Racers require large areas without many roads or people and might be found in brushy shrublands, old fields, power-line corridors and rocky slopes. Because large territories for racers are disappearing, they are listed as a species of greatest conservation need in the New Hampshire Wildlife Action Plan.



expand. Roads are serious barriers to many breeding and dispersing snakes, with cars killing many each year. Unfortunately, snakes and other wildlife are almost always forced out of their habitats when people move into them. That's why it is important to protect places like fields, pine forests, shrublands and wetlands that many snakes call home.

### MYTHBUSTERS!

Few animals are as surrounded by myth and mystery as snakes. Have you heard these whoppers?

**Snakes chase people...** No. Like all wildlife, snakes may become aggressive when backed into a corner or harassed, but they do not chase people. If you happen to be

blocking the only escape route, a snake may appear to charge you, when it's only trying to get away.

**Snakes are dangerous...** Almost never. Many people think snakes are out to get them. But the truth is, all snakes would rather avoid people than be seen. If you corner or pick up a snake, it might try to bite you because it is afraid, the same way a chipmunk or squirrel would react. But the only venomous snake in New Hampshire is the extremely rare timber rattlesnake, which will only bite if stepped on or harassed.

**Milk snakes milk cows...** Interesting theory, but no. Because milk snakes are often found in or near barns, they were once thought to suck the milk from cows. The reason milk snakes are often found near barns is because there is often an abundance of mice and other small rodents that milk snakes eat.

*Nearly half of New Hampshire's snakes are "species of conservation concern." Check the N.H. Wildlife Action Plan to learn how populations are being monitored and protected.*



## MILK SNAKE

Milk snakes are medium-sized snakes covered in red and tan blotches. They are commonly found near woodland edges, fields and rocky hillsides, but may also be present near human dwellings like barns where there are usually plenty of mice to eat. You might even find a milk snake hibernating in your basement if there are cracks in your foundation.



*A young water snake (above) closely resembles the milk snake. However, closer inspection would reveal that the water snake lacks the signature “Y” pattern that appears on the top of the head of a milk snake.*



## NORTHERN WATER SNAKE

You can find a water snake in almost any lake, pond or stream — and in many semi-aquatic habitats as well, like swamps and marshes. These large, thick snakes are most often seen basking on sticks, logs or rocks near the water. The northern water snake is the only snake in New Hampshire that is consistently found in or near water. It is not dangerous.

**For more pictures and descriptions of each of New Hampshire’s 11 snakes, look for Snakes of NH on the Fish and Game website at [www.WildNH.com](http://www.WildNH.com).**

**There are water moccasins in New Hampshire...** No way! The northern water snake is the only snake in New Hampshire that can be consistently found in lakes and ponds. The venomous water moccasin is a southern species that does not occur in New England.

So, ophiophobes, fear not! The snakes of New Hampshire are fascinating, and there’s nothing to dread from having them in your woodpile. Next time you spot a slitherer, take a closer look. Even if you aren’t quite ready to celebrate snakes’ captivating qualities, perhaps you can appreciate their quiet style and their contributions to the ecosystem.



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*Not a N.H. native, the water moccasin, or “cottonmouth,” (right) is found only as far north as Virginia. Unlike harmless water snakes, (below) its eyes (with vertical pupils) can’t be seen from directly above.*



*More snakes on the following page...*

# SNAKE FAKESOUT!



Milk snake

Many non-venomous snakes will mimic the warning signs of venomous snakes in an attempt to scare people or predators away. For example, milk snakes (*left*) often shake their tails against dried leaves or debris when they are startled — making it sound like they have a rattle! When a hognose snake (*right*) feels threatened, it will flatten its head and hiss to act like a dangerous venomous snake. If that doesn't work, it may even turn over and play dead.



Hognose snake

## WANT TO HELP SNAKES? HERE'S HOW

### Don't Kill Them

Snakes are just animals playing their role in the ecosystem. They would always rather be left alone than harassed or killed.

### Report Your Observations

The Reptile and Amphibian Reporting Program (RAARP) is a program that allows citizens to report their observations of snakes, turtles, frogs, and salamanders to Fish and Game. Biologists can use the reports to identify important habitats that need protection. To learn more, search for "RAARP" at the Fish and Game website.

### Keep Wildlife Wild

When snakes and other wildlife are removed from their natural environment, their role in the ecosystem is lost. Wildlife are adapted to living outdoors and are always better off when left alone.

### Enhance Your Backyard Habitat

Snakes and other wildlife tend to use more naturally diverse backyards, rather than manicured lawns. To make your yard attractive to snakes, create some brush piles of sticks, twigs and rocks that can be used as hiding places. Plant some native shrubs and pick some areas to let the grass grow tall. The more habitat types you have, the better chance you will have of seeing snakes.

### Minimize Pesticide Use

Pesticides are easily absorbed into the skin of amphibians like frogs and salamanders, which are an important compo-

*The ribbon snake (above) is one of New Hampshire's species in greatest need of conservation. The ringneck snake (right) is widespread and secure.*

nent in the diet of many snakes. By minimizing pesticide use in your yard, you can prevent snakes and other animals from ingesting deadly chemicals.

### Keep Cats Inside

In addition to songbirds, cats may kill many amphibians and reptiles every year. By keeping your cat indoors, you can protect wildlife while also protecting your pet from cars and other dangers.

### Support Local Conservation Efforts

Snakes benefit whenever their habitat is protected by conservation. Check out your local conservation commission to help ensure that your community has plenty of places for snakes and other wildlife to thrive.

### Join PARC

Check out the Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (PARC) website, [www.parcplace.org](http://www.parcplace.org), to learn how you can join like-minded citizens, professionals and organizations in protecting reptiles and amphibians and their habitats. You can also find information from NEPARC, the New England chapter of PARC, at [www.pwrc.usgs.gov/neparc](http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/neparc).

