

# Snakes in Alberta



A helpful guide for anyone living and working in snake country.

# Snakes

are Important

Hating snakes makes life hard for them. Snakes face many pressures, but one of their biggest challenges continues to be public relations.

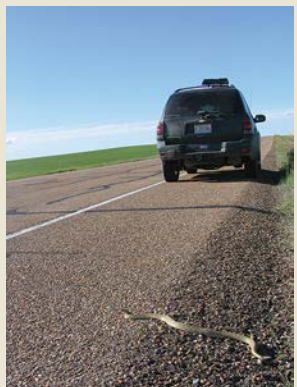


So dislike them if you must, but don't kill'em!

Like 'em or not, snakes are essential members of the environment. They contribute significantly to controlling rodent (deer mice, ground squirrels and pocket gophers) and insect populations. Snakes are also important prey for mammals and raptors. The preservation of snakes equals the preservation of a healthy native prairie ecosystem.

## Threats to Snakes

- Roads: vehicles are the biggest killers of snakes
- Habitat loss due to resource, agricultural, and urban development
- Intentional killing by people who consider snakes loathsome creatures



# Identifying **Snakes**

## prairie rattlesnake



### facts

The rattle at the end of the tail is the most distinguishing feature

Triangular-shaped head

Vertical pupils

Heat-sensing facial pits below eyes

Body is yellow-green or brown with dark blotches down back and sides

May be active at any time of day

A passive snake but when harassed it may coil, raise its head, and shake its tail; it may strike

Venomous

Despite the notorious stories of rattlesnake bites, the number of bites a year is actually very low, and the truth is, no-one has ever died from a rattlesnake bite in Alberta. It's easy to avoid a bite by leaving snakes alone. Bites occur only when a snake is surprised or picked up.

## **What to Do if Bitten by a Prairie Rattlesnake in Alberta**

- Stay calm and seek medical help immediately, even if you have no symptoms.
- Clean the affected area with soap and water if available.
- Remove constrictive clothing and jewelry, especially rings.
- Apply a loose band just enough to indent skin, 4 inches above the wound. Remove band every 10 minutes to allow blood circulation. Immobilize the limb.
- To assist doctors, mark the change in swelling with a marker and note the time periodically.

## **Do Not...**

apply a tourniquet.

make an incision.

suck the venom out.

ice the wound.

kill the snake, they are legally protected and doctors do not require it for treatment.

# bull snake



## facts

Our largest snake, with a long, stout body

Head same width as neck

Round pupils

No facial pits

Body is yellowish, with black to brick-red blotches

May be active at any time of day

When harassed it may hiss, strike, and vibrate its tail

Not venomous, kills prey by constriction

# western hog-nosed snake



## facts

Pointy, upturned snout

Stocky body

Round pupils

Body is light brown with dark blotches, the pattern may be bold or faint

Mainly active during the day but can be active at night

When harassed, it may roll over and play dead

Possesses venom toxic to prey but not humans



# wandering garter snake



## facts

Long and slender, typical of all garter snakes

Body is brown, grey or greenish, with checkered back

Yellow or brown stripe running down its back

Prefers wetland habitats

Like all garter snakes, it has mild venom to immobilize prey, but the venom is completely harmless to humans

When harassed it may bite and emit a repulsive secretion from its rear end

# plains garter snake



## facts

Striped snake that's greenish grey, olive or brownish

Bright orange strip running down its back and yellowish stripes on the sides

Active during the day

Most likely to be encountered near water

When harassed it rarely bites but will writhe and twist to escape and smear its attacker with a foul smelling secretion



# red-sided garter snake



## facts

Dark body with yellow stripes on the back and sides

May have red marks down the sides

Can be found in almost any habitat type

Highly cold tolerate, this species ranges to the Northwest Territories border

When harassed it is likely to bite and smear the attacker with a repulsive secretion

# Homes of **Snakes**

In the summer, snakes are continually on the move, never staying in the same place for long.

In the fall, snakes move to dens called hibernacula. Prairie rattlesnakes, bull snakes, and wandering and plains garter snakes often hibernate together in communal hibernacula. No, they do not eat each other. Hibernacula are essential for the survival of snakes.

Hibernacula are typically located along river valleys, coulees, and within transition zones between riparian and upland habitats.

Snakes always return to the same hibernaculum year after year, so it's crucial they are not disturbed or destroyed by human activity, year round.

Occasionally, snakes will make basements or other man-made structures places to hibernate. If this happens to you, contact your local Fish & Wildlife office.



## Odd **Snake** Out

The hog-nosed snake is the oddball; it does not spend the winter with other snakes.

It hibernates alone in existing mammal burrows or creates its own burrow to spend the winter in.



# If you Encounter a **Snake**

(or want to avoid an encounter)

Firstly, don't panic. Enjoy it and be respectful.

Keep your distance and try to identify it. Bull snakes will try to trick you into thinking it's a rattlesnake.

Leave it alone—even if it is on your property. Snakes are always on the move, so it will be gone before you know it. Call your local Fish & Wildlife office if concerned.

When working in snake country always be observant; look for snakes around equipment, before moving objects they may be hiding under, and before entering or reaching into oil and gas structures. Wear protective footwear and snake gaiters.

When walking in areas where snakes may be present, be observant and move slowly.

Snakes are not interested in harming you but if you are uncomfortable with snakes and you'd prefer not to have them in your yard keep your grass and brush trimmed, clean up garbage & bird seed, and do not leave wood piles or other places for critters to hide (i.e., under sheds, decks, steps). If you have rodents, predators (i.e., snakes) may be attracted.

Remember, all snakes are protected from killing, harassment, and capture.

# Help Snakes

Do not kill or harass. All snakes and their dens are protected from killing, harm, possession, and destruction under the *Alberta Wildlife Act*.

Conserve native prairie habitat and areas likely to contain hibernacula (coulee and river valley habitat).

Slow down, watch for and avoid snakes on roads; especially where you see “snake crossing” signs on Alberta roadways.

Protect hibernacula from disturbance and development. Report hibernacula to your local Fish and Wildlife office.

Prevent harming snakes when mowing, tilling, haying, and constructing by checking the area for snakes first.

Contact qualified individuals, such as Fish and Wildlife Officers and Wildlife Biologists, to relocate snakes if necessary.

Relax your fear, they are not out to get you.

Share your positive knowledge and attitude about snakes.



# New **Snake** to Alberta

The eastern yellow-bellied racer was recently confirmed at a hibernaculum in the far southeast corner of the province.

Alberta is fortunate to have a new snake species added to its rich biodiversity. The extent of its range and how long it has persisted in Alberta is unknown.

To help us learn more about this snake, report your observations to your local Fish & Wildlife office.



For more information on snakes in Alberta visit:

- [aep.alberta.ca/fish-wildlife](http://aep.alberta.ca/fish-wildlife)
- [aep.alberta.ca/fish-wildlife/human-wildlife-conflict/snakes.aspx](http://aep.alberta.ca/fish-wildlife/human-wildlife-conflict/snakes.aspx)
- [Multisar.ca](http://Multisar.ca)
- [ab-conservation.com](http://ab-conservation.com)

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