



Snakes in Rockland

The autumn is a beautiful season for hiking in Rockland and the Hudson Valley. With hiking naturally comes a concern about poisonous plants and snakes. The following article about snakes was written by Jack Focht, naturalist at the Bear Mountain Trailside Museum, to help calm fears about snakes on trails and even in home backyards.

Fourteen kinds of snakes live in Rockland County. Of these, only two are poisonous, the copperhead and the rattlesnake. None of the rest need be feared. The poisonous kinds are scarce and largely confined to uninhabited areas of the Palisades, Ramapo Mountains and Hudson Highlands. Your chances of encountering one is less likely the further you get from these areas and practically zero in populated suburbia.

But that doesn't satisfy the person who has seen a snake in the backyard and has been alarmed by neighborhood talk of copperheads. Ninety percent of snakes that are found are harmless garter or milk snakes that feed on insects, mice and other tiny creatures.

The common garter snake grows up to 24 inches long and has yellowish stripes going down the back with dark spots between the stripes.

The eastern milk snake grows to about 30 inches in length and is colored by reddish blotches with black borders, a piano-key pattern on the stomach and a Y-shaped gray patch on its head. Young milk snakes are sometimes mistaken for copperheads.

To distinguish between harmful and non-threatening snakes, refer to the chart below:

| Poisonous | Non-Poisonous |
|--|---|
| Large, triangular head, much wider than body Eyes elliptical, cat-like Body very heavy for length of snake; looks fat Possible rattles at tip of tail | Small head, the same width or not much wider than body Eyes round with round pupils Body slender; appears long and thin |

If you find it difficult to identify snakes, it may help to look at live ones. You can see them at the Bear Mountain Trailside Museum. Knowing the difference can save you needless concern and anxiety.

Most snakes shun suburban life. The vibrations and noise from kids' play, lawn mowers, cars and pets tend to keep them away. The well-groomed backyard offers them little food and cover. Fringe areas with weeds and stone walls, piles of firewood, junk, brush and boards are more to their liking. Anything that

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attracts rodents will also increase your chances of having snakes in the yard. Get rid of their food and cover and snakes often leave too.

Bulldozer activity surrounding neighborhoods may also evict them from their natural habitats and temporarily force them your way. There is no repellent or spray available to keep them out of yards, walls and cracked foundations.

House entry is rare and most snakes found in suburban areas of Rockland are harmless and beneficial. To catch a snake in the house, place a moist, crumpled rag or towel on the floor. Snakes will usually hide under such damp, dark places and can be caught and released outdoors.

Even in Rockland's parks, your chances of meeting poisonous snakes are slim. A recent hiker of the Appalachian Trail said he met only one rattlesnake in his 2,000 mile walk from Maine to Georgia, but that was in Bear Mountain State Park. Still, you have to go out of your way to find snakes. Of course, picnic and recreation areas are safer than going off the beaten path.

Fortunately, our poisonous snakes are non-aggressive and attack only when cornered or stepped on. They usually shy away and hide until you pass. Just be careful where you step, sit or place your hands- snakes are effectively camouflaged.

Avoid bites in snake country by wearing protective clothing. High leather boots and loose pants help. Also, carry a snake bite kit. If bitten, the fang marks along with swelling, discoloration and pain are unmistakable indications of a poisonous snake bite. Don't panic but get to a hospital quickly!

To have a snake identified, take it to the Bear Mountain Trailside Museum.

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