

How to Safely Handle a Snake Encounter

Outdoor classrooms developed through the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program are designed to create habitat for wildlife. Some of the wildlife that may visit your schoolyard habitat could be animals like snakes that may frighten some of your students. Below are some tips to help you minimize your students' anxiety, reduce the likelihood of encountering a snake, and know how to handle a snake encounter.

Tip #1: Educate your students.

- Alabama is home to around 50 species of snakes, but only six of those are venomous and one of them is quite rare.
- Snakes, like all other animals, require food, water, and shelter to survive. They may visit the school's wildlife habitat in search of these resources.
- Humans are not a source of food for snakes in Alabama. Generally speaking, rats, other rodents, and bugs are the preferred food source for most of our native snakes.
- Snakes are cold-blooded. This means the temperature outside impacts the activity of snakes. They are not typically active in extremely hot or cold temperatures. Sometimes they move into an area searching for a warm place to bathe in the sun.
- Shelter comes in many forms for snakes. Some are natural, like wood and leaf piles, tall plants, or tree trunks. Snakes also hide in manmade places like underneath flower pots and structures like pavilions.



Cottonmouth on Natural Debris Pile

Tip #2: Minimize the potential resources that attract snakes.

- The best way to keep snakes out of your outdoor classroom is by minimizing the resources they are after. Relocating a snake to another habitat does not fix the problem if its desired resources remain, as another snake will move in to the area in an attempt to get those resources as well.
- Clean the ground underneath bird feeders regularly. Seeds and scraps attract mice and other rodents, which are food sources for snakes.
- Don't pile sticks and leaves for long periods of time as this can provide shelter for snakes.
- Keep any grass in the area cut short and keep gardens weeded to remove potential shelter or hunting opportunities for snakes.
- Close off spaces underneath storage units, pavilions, etc. where they may hide or search for food.



Timber Rattlesnake at
Base of Hydrangea

Tip #3: Minimize potential encounters with snakes.

- Minimize encounters by always watching where you step.
- Visually inspect and poke bushes with long sticks before reaching hands in.

Tip #4: Remain calm if you encounter a snake.

- Back away and leave the snake alone.
- Snap a photo from a safe distance if you would like to have it identified. You can email pictures to OC Consultant Tyler Burgener at tburgener@alabamawildlife.org.

- Do not try to pick the snake up. If you decide to try to remove it from the area, spray it gently with a water hose while keeping a safe distance.
- The only reason a snake has to bite you is out of defense, as you are not a source of food. So, if the snake doesn't feel threatened, it won't bite. Touching it or trying to kill it only puts you at risk.

Tip #5: Pay attention to the behavior of the snake.

- Camouflage - They try to remain unseen in hopes that you will just pass them by.
- Flee – They will try to get away from you. If you are between the snake and its safe place, it may move towards you—just move out of the way.
- Intimidate – Snakes will try to intimidate you with some sort of display. For instance, rattlesnakes (and other species) rattle their tails, and cottonmouths flash their white mouth. Many snakes flatten their heads and bodies to appear larger, and some snakes even play dead.
- Strike &/or Bite – This is a snake's ultimate defense. If you continue to approach it or pick it up, it will react to protect itself.



Camouflaged Rough Green Snake



Gray Rat Snake Flattening Head

How to Handle a Snake Bite

Though venomous snake bites can be very dangerous and should always be taken seriously, note that 25-50% of venomous snake bites are dry bites (no venom is released). Venom is a costly resource that snakes do not want to waste, so they don't always use it in defensive bites. Bites from a non-venomous snake are generally harmless but they can cause infection or an allergic reaction in some people. Because of this, follow the steps below for *any and all* snake bites.

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Move away from the snake. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Take a photograph of the snake from a safe distance if possible. Identifying the snake can help with treatment. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Call 911 or local emergency number immediately. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Stay still and calm. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Remove jewelry or tight clothing before swelling starts. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Sit or lie down so that the bite is in a neutral, comfortable position lower than the heart. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Clean the bite with soap and water. Cover or wrap it loosely with a clean, dry bandage. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If possible, try to remember to draw a circle around the affected area and mark the time of the bite and the initial reaction. If you are able, redraw the circle around the site of injury marking the progression of time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Try to catch or trap the snake, even if it is dead or decapitated. <input type="checkbox"/> Wait until symptoms start to call for help. <input type="checkbox"/> Cut the bite or try to remove the venom. <input type="checkbox"/> Drink caffeine or alcohol. <input type="checkbox"/> Use a tourniquet. <input type="checkbox"/> Do not apply ice or immerse the wound in water. <input type="checkbox"/> Don't take pain-relieving medicine, such as aspirin, ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin IB, others) or naproxen sodium (Aleve).

Information from: John Hopkins Medicine, Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, and the Mayo Clinic

Additional Resources:

- Outdoor Alabama's Watchable Wildlife – Snakes → www.outdooralabama.com/reptiles/snakes
- Alabama Reptile and Amphibian ID & Education → www.facebook.com/groups/bamaherpid/
- *Lizards and Snakes of Alabama* by Craig Guyer, Mark A. Bailey, and Robert H. Mount (ISBN-13: 978-0817359164)