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RURAL LEGEND: Snakes

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- Skills and guides - Ecology -



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Description :

Snakes have always been a misunderstood group of animals. In every corner of the world you will find different legends of snake origins and powers.

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In the United States there are quite a few myths surrounding these reptiles that still linger around today. Most, unfortunately, are at the expense of the snake. Outlined in this article are a few of the more common myths, along with a few facts to hopefully replace them.

Myth 1: Hognose Snakes aka "Hissing Adders" Spit Deadly Venom Old timers sometimes speak of Hissing Adders, a type of snake that can spit its venom out with its breath and one whiff will kill a man instantly. **Reality:** The Hissing Adder is a nickname for hognose snakes (*Heterodon* sp), which in self defense will raise its head, flatten its neck and hiss and strike in an attempt to fool would-be predators into thinking its deadly. Hognose snakes ARE in fact venomous, but their venom is very mild and not considered to be dangerous to humans. The delivery system is also very different than most of our native venomous snakes. Copperheads and rattlesnakes for example, have hollow fangs that work like hypodermic needles that inject venom into an animal. The hognose however must chew the venom into its prey rather than inject it. Humans do not need to fear this species and after a few minutes of bluff hissing and striking, wild hognose snakes sometimes roll over and play dead!

Myth 2: Copperhead moms carry their young in their mouth The myth explains that if a mother copperhead (*Agkistrodon contortrix*) is in fear for her babies, she will let them crawl into her mouth and carry them away to safety. **Reality:** No snake will do anything remotely of the sort. In fact, most copperheads leave mom right after birth.

Myth 3: A snake's legs will pop out if you throw one into a fire Snakes are obviously legless, until you throw one into a fire. Then its legs will come out and help it scurry to safety. That's the myth anyways. **Reality:** A snake wouldn't be a snake if it had legs. One explanation for this myth is that people would often burn brush piles or other heaps where snakes were thought to be, and when the fire started, lizards would instead scurry from the pile. A lizard would look very similar to a snake with legs.

Myth 4: Boy mistakes baby copperheads for worms I have heard several variations of this story in several different states. Usually the person telling the story remembers it "like it was yesterday" and knows the boy involved. All variations are pretty similar and basically say that a boy was turning over tin and rocks looking for fishing bait when he found a nest of what he thought was colorful worms. Someone spots the boy a few minutes later with red marks all over him and ask what's wrong. He explains that his worms were biting him and the other person sees that he is actually carrying around a can of copperheads. The boy dies shortly afterwards. **Reality:** I could find no documented cases of this actually occurring in any of the places the various tellers could "remember" it happening. Young copperheads do however, possess a yellow tail when they are born that they wiggle like a worm to lure frogs and lizards close enough to strike. This little trick used by the young snakes may be how the myth originated.

Myth 5: Swimmers in a flooded rock quarry are devoured by snakes A western Kentucky rock quarry had such a bad snake infestation that it was closed down and flooded. A few weeks later a couple teenagers went swimming in the new reservoir, and the boy was attacked by swarms of copperheads, rattlesnakes and cottonmouths swimming up from the depths. The boy's body sunk and did not resurface so the quarry was drained and all that was left was the skeleton- picked to the bone by the snakes. **Reality:** This was one of the most creative and unrealistic myths I've ever heard. All snakes can swim, but no Kentucky snake can live in the bottom of a deep quarry for weeks on end. Nor can snakes "pick" a person down to their bones. Instead a snake must swallow a prey item whole.

Myth 6: Snakes suck cow utters Milk snakes get their name from sucking milk from cows. **Reality:** Snakes are often plentiful around farms where they come to eat rodents that accumulate near crops and livestock feed so there have been many sightings of snakes in barns with cows. The myth most likely came from a bad assumption that the reptiles were more interested in dairy than rodent.

I hope this sheds a little light on a few of those unjustified beliefs.