

**“Sometimes Snakes” ~ by Ed Patterson**  
(Ed’s snake photos have a solid border.)

While searching for salamanders it is almost certain that snakes will be encountered; yet I am surprised that I don’t see snakes more often. I don’t actively look for snakes but when they do appear I take time to study them and make note of where they were found.

One question I am asked when I tell people I search for salamanders is, “Aren’t you afraid of finding snakes or getting bit?” Most snakes are reasonably docile, unless intentionally provoked. They often know you are nearby before you see them. If you give them appropriate space they can be observed from a distance.

The **Northern Ring-necked Snake** (*Diadophis punctatus edwardsii*) is the snake I most frequently find while searching for salamanders. This small, non-venomous snake is found in and around salamander habitat since salamanders are its primary food source. The distinctive yellow-orange band around its neck is easy to pick out. When I find Northern-Ringnecked snakes it seems that the number of salamanders nearby is usually less than I expect. Eastern Red-backed Salamanders are a favorite food.



The **Eastern Black Rat Snake**, what most people see when they say they saw a black snake, is often observed crossing highways. They can reach lengths of up to seven feet. This species, along with many other snakes, suffer significant population losses due to highway mortality.

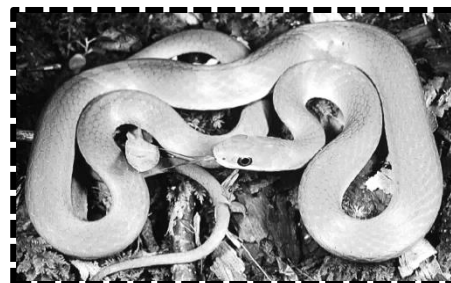
Black Rat Snakes are good climbers and often climb trees and shrubs searching for chipmunks and squirrels. They are habitat generalists and can be found just about everywhere from fields to forests.

The other black snake found in this region is the **Northern Racer** (*Coluber constrictor constrictor*). The species moves very fast and is known for ‘scoping’, i.e. elevating its head above the surroundings to seek out prey. Racers are sleeker than Ratsnakes.

The Racer is our fastest snake and can change directions quickly. They generally don’t stick around long once they have been sighted or feel threatened.



The **Smooth Greensnake** (*Opheodrys vernalis*), often described as the ‘grass snake’, is found in grassy areas where its green color blends in well with its surroundings. The Smooth Greensnake is an elusive species and one that is not as well-documented as other snakes. When I found one in litter along the edge of a trail parking lot in August 2015 it was the first one I had observed in nearly thirty-five years.



The **Queensnake** (*Regina septemvittata*) is a small, tan-brown watersnake with four brown stripes on its belly and a cream colored stripe on its lower side. It is known as the 'crayfish snake' - its primary food source is newly molted crayfish. It can be found under rocks along stream, lake and pond edges and will often climb into bushes along waterways to look for crayfish in the waters below. Queensnakes prefer clean water, free of siltation which makes for good crayfish habitat.



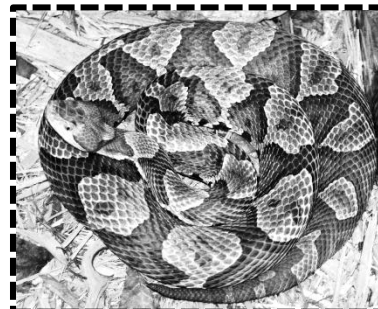
The **Eastern Milksnake** (*Lampropeltis triangulum triangulum*) is occasionally encountered when looking for salamanders. The Milksnake has a distinctive band pattern on its red, brown or grey body and a checkerboard pattern on its belly. A good way to identify a Milksnake is by the "V", "U" or "Y" shaped blotch on top of its head.

The name is derived from an old belief that these snakes stole milk from the udders of cows. While they do inhabit barns they do not drink milk. They feed on mice, rodents, birds, other snakes, frogs and insects. They are powerful constrictors and will coil up and lash their tail when found and make attempts to strike. Although harmless to humans they are often mistakenly killed by people who think they are Copperheads. They are found throughout Pennsylvania and in our area are especially fond of shale rock cover areas. In areas where I find Valley & Ridge Salamanders or Northern Slimys I sometimes uncover Milksnakes.



I've learned to appreciate the snakes I do encounter. Snakes are much maligned; many people think the only good snake is a dead snake but they play an important role in the balance of nature. Their intricate patterns and unique habits make them worthy of our study, respect and protection. And during slow times when the hot, dry days of summer arrive they add interest to any salamander search.

**Note:** *The two venomous snakes in our area are the Northern Copperhead (top), and the Timber Rattlesnake (bottom), which I have yet to encounter while looking for salamanders.*



**Northern Copperhead**  
(*Agkistrodon contortrix mokasen*)



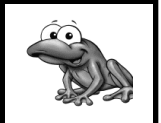
**Timber Rattlesnake**  
(*Crotalus horridus*)

**ALERT!**

**BOTH** of these snakes are venomous pit viper subspecies found in eastern USA.

**"Man Vs Wild!" ~ Poem excerpt ~**  
*by surya surya*

Snake slithered fast across the land,  
through earthen clods and burrows,  
moving smooth and fast,  
held its head lowered,



eyes fixed on target the frog,  
took the shortest path,  
to get on fast . . .

