

# ANIMAL CRACKERS

**SNAKES** from 24

in military service in Africa, where he regularly rid village dwellings of deadly black mamba snakes.

“The fear of snakes is hard-wired into humans,” explains Eric D’Aleo, a naturalist at the Squam Lakes Natural Science Center in Holderness. “If you look at evolutionary advantages in primates, having a healthy fear of snakes probably aided in survival. You could potentially die from a snake bite. We still have that fear within us, especially if we’re startled.”

Here in New England, snakes are the stuff of outdoor adventures, a quiet but universal part of outside life - or the surprise around the corner in my family’s case. Thankfully, New Hampshire snakes are decidedly less threatening than the images conjured by history, literature, TV - or our imaginations. From April through November they can be found sunning themselves on roads, rocks and hiking trails. During the winter they like to hibernate in ant hills, mammal burrows, and in unheated basements that hover around 40 degrees.

“Stone foundation, dirt basement. That’s why you have snakes,” says D’Aleo. A longtime admirer of snakes, D’Aleo built a stone wall near his house to attract them, unfortunately without luck, he says.

If we can inch past panic and trepidation, snakes are to be admired and encouraged: They feast on troublesome insects, and efficiently dispose of invading rodents, performing an invaluable service to humans by keeping rodent-borne illnesses in check.

“You don’t have to love them, and it’s OK to be afraid of them, but you need to let them be,” says D’Aleo. “They’re really valuable species.”



*Eric D’Aleo, naturalist at the Squam Lakes Natural Science Center, holds one of their residents, a garter snake, the most common snake species in the state.* ROBERTA BAKER PHOTO

There are currently 11 varieties of snakes in the Granite state, and only the timber rattler, the shyest and rarest, is actually poisonous. If you’re a vicarious thrill-seeker, it’s fun to gape at pictures on various state websites. In their dark phase, most common in New Hampshire, timber rattlers are deep brown, almost black, with a hint of dark and lighter bands on their flanks. Heavy-looking and thick-bodied, they grow to

three to five feet, and have a pronounced triangular head and a lighter-colored rattle at the end of their tails.

They can be found in crevices and basking on ledges and outcroppings on warm, rocky slopes and in sunny spots in damp, bushy, deciduous forests – that is, if you can find them at all. Your chances of encountering one are extremely remote: In New Hampshire timber

See **SNAKES** on 26

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Courtesy of the Weirs Times & Cocheco Times