** This news release from K-State Research and Extension is available online at https://ksre-learn.com/agriculture-snakes

Released: April 1, 2025

Odds of running into a venomous snake in Kansas? Low, says wildlife expert

K-State's Ricketts says not all slithering creatures are dangerous

By Jacob Klaudt, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. — Slimy, slithering, scaly and…helpful?

A springtime heat surge has brought snakes out of hibernation and on the prowl for food after a long winter's rest. While their presence may put some on edge, Kansas State University wildlife specialist Drew Ricketts said not to worry because many present little danger, and can actually do people a favor.

"They're anxious to get out of their winter cover, find food, explore the environment, probably look for a mate and find a place to nest," he said. "They're active, and people are likely to encounter them. One of the challenges is that many folks are snake-averse."

Of the 42 species of snakes found in Kansas, only seven can deliver venom.

"There are two species of copperheads, so that makes it seem like a little greater chance, and we also haven't detected a cottonmouth in the state since the early '90s, so the number of venomous snakes you're likely to encounter is pretty low," Ricketts said.

The likelihood of someone getting bitten by a snake strongly relates to whether they handle that animal. Ricketts said that over half the people bitten by venomous snakes were handling them, so the ability to identify snakes when up close proves to be valuable.

Key characteristics of venomous snakes:

- A broad, triangular-shaped head due to venom sacks located on the backside.
- Keeled scales, or scales that have a ridge down the center.
- A secondary opening between their eye and nasal passage, which serves as a heat sensor.
- Elliptical pupils shaped like a cats', for example.

Snakes come out of hibernation looking for many prey items to eat – a feature that benefits humans in more ways than one, according to Ricketts.

“Smaller snakes eat mainly insects, but we also have snakes like the king snake that eat venomous snakes and reptiles, so there are a couple of kinds that do folks a service who don't like to see them,” he said.

He added: “The vast majority of snakes, though, are going to eat small mammals; they're eating native rats and mice and doing folks a favor that way, too.”

To lower the chances of any human-wildlife conflict with snakes, Ricketts recommends following the acronym HER:

- **Habitat modification**. This step involves removing cover that attracts snakes to a property, such as tall grass, piles of wood, rocks and other things that allow them to hide. If snake-averse, Ricketts says people should strive to have a more sterile yard with minimal landscaping.

- **Exclusion**. People can exclude snakes from their homes by completely sealing them off. Snakes can get under loose doors and fit through openings a half-inch tall by an inch or two wide, so Ricketts encourages covering even the smallest areas to achieve maximum exclusion.

- **Removal**. If a snake ends up in a residence, animal control specialists may deploy glue boards to catch the snake. When snakes enter houses, they tend to follow structures like walls. Thus, Ricketts says, areas behind furniture has proven to be the best place for these boards to catch snakes while excluding pets.

More information on managing wildlife is available online from K-State’s Department of Horticulture and Natural Resources.

-30-

FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
K-State Wildlife and Outdoor Enterprise Management, https://www.wildlife.k-state.edu

Story by:
Jacob Klaudt
jbklaudt@ksu.edu

More information:
Drew Ricketts
785-532-1949
arickett@ksu.edu