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G89-908 Controlling Snake Problems Around Homes

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Controlling Snake Problems Around Homes

Controlling snake problems around residences is covered here.

Ron J. Johnson, Extension Wildlife Specialist

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Occasionally people encounter snakes around their homes or in other places, and wonder what to do about the snakes or whether they are dangerous. In nearly all cases, these are harmless types such as garter snakes or bullsnakes.

However, Nebraska does have four kinds of poisonous snakes -- the prairie rattlesnake, timber rattlesnake, western massasauga (a small rattlesnake), and copperhead. The prairie rattlesnake is found in the western two-thirds of Nebraska and the other three in the southeastern corner (*Figure 1*).

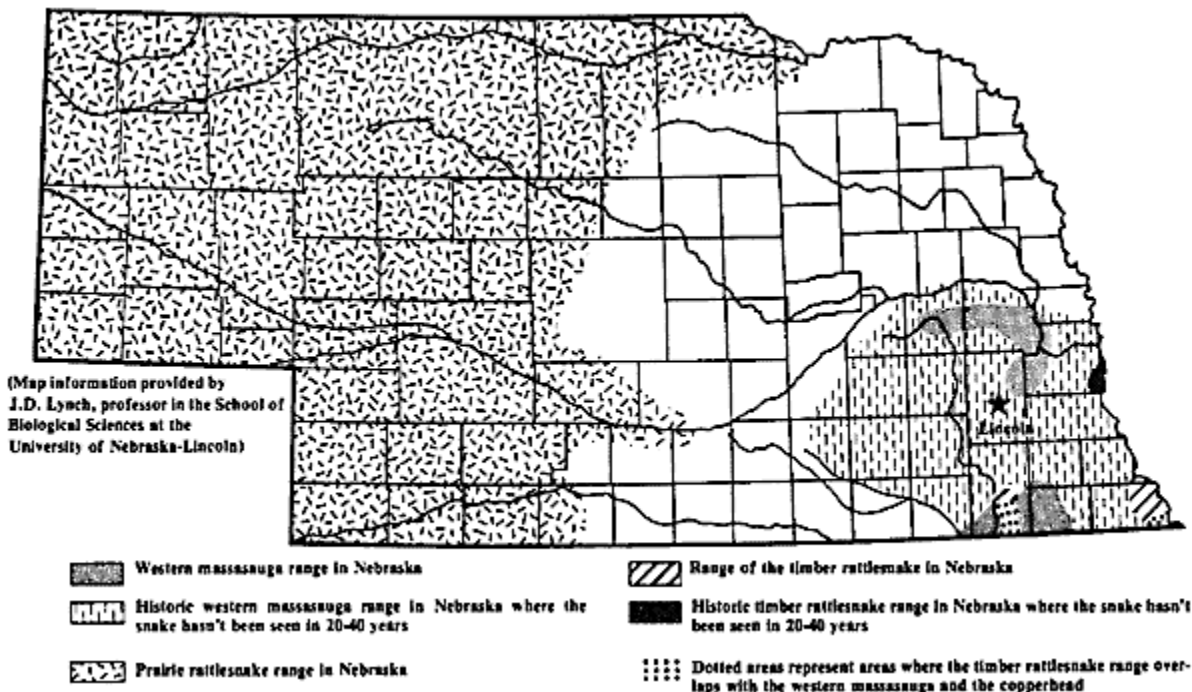


Figure 1. This map shows the areas where each of Nebraska's four poisonous snakes may occur.

This NebGuide provides guidelines for controlling snakes in areas near homes where they cause problems or concerns. If you live in an area where poisonous snakes occur, consult EC 89-1761, *Poisonous Snake and Snakebite in Nebraska*.

Knowledge about snakes is helpful in understanding how to handle situations where they are encountered. Consider purchasing a good field guide and reviewing books at libraries to help sharpen your skills. Another good way to learn about snakes and how to identify them is to view them at local zoos and nature centers.

Legal Status

Snakes in Nebraska are not protected by state or federal law. Although some, such as the red-bellied and black-headed snakes, are quite rare, none are currently listed as endangered or threatened. Situations and laws may change, however, so if in doubt check with the local conservation officer or the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Even though snakes in Nebraska are not legally protected, it's best just to leave them alone when they are not causing a problem.

Controlling Snake Problems

Remove what attracts snakes. The most effective and lasting way to discourage snakes around a home, such as in the yard and garden, is to make the area unattractive to them. You can do this by removing their survival needs, especially shelter or hiding places.

During warm months, when snakes are active and when most people see them, they are attracted to cool, damp shelter. Remove cover such as boards lying on the ground, rock piles, and weedy growth near buildings. Check around cement walks or porches for cracks or holes that might provide an entrance to snakes for shelter. Repair or close these access points so they can't be used.

If you have a wood pile for a fireplace or stove, make the stack away from the house. Wood can be moved near the house as needed during colder months, when snakes aren't active. Building a rack to hold the wood pile at least 12 inches above the ground also will discourage snakes because the wood (shelter) is separated from the cool, moist soil.

Check the base of storage sheds to see if snakes might crawl beneath for cover. If so, close off access beneath the shed with packed soil or building materials such as metal or 1/4-inch or smaller hardware cloth. To form a tight barrier against snakes, building materials should be buried about six inches under the soil. Although some snakes can push through loose soil, they can't dig or go through hard soil because they have no digging adaptations such as legs or claws. Snakes will use holes made by mice or other rodents, so controlling these rodents may be needed in some situations. Often, removing snake shelter and hiding spots also removes the habitat of insects and rodents that are snake foods, further reducing the attractiveness of the area to snakes.

It's also a good idea to check around the house foundation for cracks or openings where a snake or other unwanted guests (such as mice) might enter. Close all openings larger than 1/4 inch and caulk any gaps where surface wires or pipes enter. Holes or cracks in masonry foundations (poured concrete and concrete blocks or bricks) can be sealed with mortar. Holes in wooden buildings can be repaired with fine mesh hardware cloth and/or sheet metal.

Discourage snakes by making the area unattractive to them. You can do that by:

- removing snake cover, such as boards on the ground, rock piles, weedy growth near buildings.
- checking cement walks or porches and house foundations for cracks or holes that might provide an entrance for snakes, and repairing those cracks and holes.
- stacking wood away from the house.
- checking the base of storage sheds and closing off access.

For rural homes, check to ensure that septic or sump pump drain tiles are not open outside. If the tile is open at the end, cover it with 1/4-inch mesh hardware cloth. Check periodically to ensure that the wire doesn't interfere with the tile drainage function.

Snake Proof Fence. Constructing a snake proof fence (*Figure 2*) may be a good option to consider, particularly where poisonous snakes are encountered. Fencing an entire yard to exclude snakes usually is not practical, but enclosing a play space for children too young to recognize dangerous snakes might be a worthwhile investment. The following fence design was described by William Stickel of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

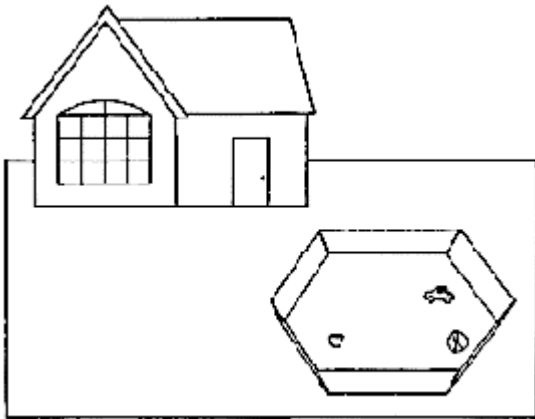


Figure 2. Though fairly expensive, a properly constructed snake-proof fence can keep snakes from entering a given area.

The fence should be made of heavy galvanized hardware cloth, 36 inches wide with a 1/4-inch mesh. The lower edge should be buried six inches in the ground and the fence should be slanted outward from the bottom to the top at a 30 degree angle (*Figure 3*).

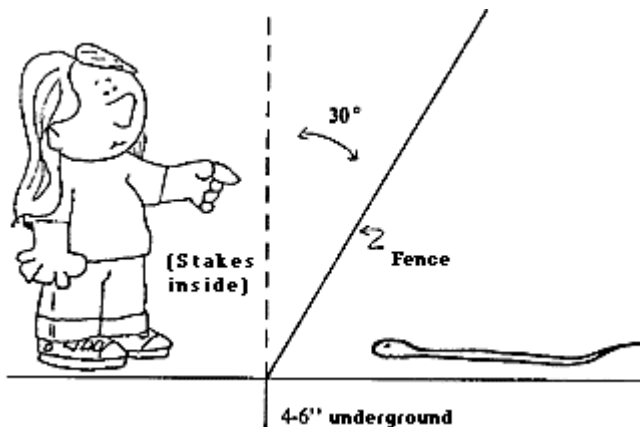


Figure 3. This is a side view of a snake-proof fence to exclude snakes.

Place supporting stakes inside the fence and make sure any gate is tightly fitted. Gates should be hinged to swing inward because of the outward slope of the fence. Any opening under the fence should be firmly filled. Vegetation just outside the fence should be kept short because snakes might use these plants to crawl over the fence.

If children tend to crush the fence, it can be supported by more and sturdier stakes and by strong wire connected to its upper edge.

Chemical Controls. There are no repellents, fumigants or toxicants federally registered for snake control. The potential for development of such snake controls is complicated by the diet, body temperature, and other biological aspects of snakes.

Various home remedies have been suggested for repelling snakes. Several of these were evaluated on whether they would repel black rat snakes (*Elaphe obsoleta*). Treatments included moth balls, sulfur, gourd vines, a tacky bird repellent, lime, cayenne pepper spray, sisal rope, coal tar and creosote, artificial skunk scent, and musk from a king snake (eats other snakes). None of these remedies prevented the snakes from crossing them.

Some sticky materials have prevented snakes from climbing to wood duck nest boxes when the materials were applied in 18-inch bands around the supporting poles. This technique might be appropriate if snakes are a problem at bird nest boxes mounted on poles, but otherwise is less practical.

Removal From Inside a Building. Snakes occasionally find their way into some homes, primarily basements. They are attracted by the warmth on cold days or the coolness on hot ones. They may enter through a hole around the foundation or through an open or loose door or basement window. Should this occur, you need to get them out, then close holes so they are kept out.

A good way to remove a snake is to sweep it with a broom into a large bucket, then take it outside to a distant place to release it or, if desired, the snake can be killed with a hoe or club. If you can't find the snake to capture it but think one is present in the basement, consider using the rumpled cloth or glue trap techniques described below in the "Traps For Inside" section.

Traps For Inside. Snakes in basements or houses can be attracted for capture by placing rumpled damp cloths (example: burlap bag) covered by a dry one on the floor near a place the snake is likely to be. The rumples provide spaces for snakes to enter under the cloth. Snakes find such cloths attractive because they provide a cool, damp, and out-of-sight place to hide -- and there you'll find them later. Snakes under the cloths can be captured or the whole works can be scooped into a large shovel and carried outside.

Snakes in basements or crawl spaces and under porches or mobile homes can also be captured using rodent glue boards. Captured snakes must be humanely killed (for example, quickly with a hoe or club) or removed and released unharmed by pouring common cooking oil on them. The oil breaks down the glue and the snakes can be removed with a stick or pole.

One glue board arrangement, developed by James E. Knight at New Mexico State University, will capture even large snakes up to five or six feet long. Use a 1/4-inch plywood board about 16 x 24 inches. Tack or glue two to four rodent glue traps (or use bulk glue) along one side, and drill a hole, about 3/4 inch diameter, in an opposite corner (*Figure 4*). The hole allows removal of the board and snake using a hook on the end of a long stick. The edges of plastic-tray type glue traps may need trimming in order to provide a flat surface.

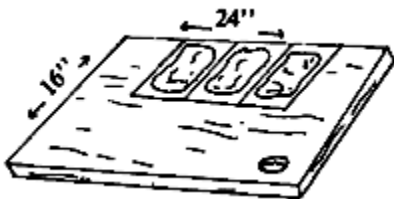


Figure 4. A glue trap to catch snakes indoors or under porches can be made by attaching rodent glue traps to a wooden board.

Place the board against a wall where the snake is likely to travel but away from pipes or other objects that the snake might use for leverage to escape. Less elaborate arrangements, such as glue traps used alone or placed on stiff cardboard, probably are sufficient to capture most small snakes that are encountered in houses in Nebraska.

Use glue boards only indoors or under structures and only where children, pets, or desirable non-target wildlife can't reach them. The glue is messy and difficult to remove from animals. Common

cooking oil helps remove the glue, but it's still a mess best avoided.

Traps for Outside. Current trap designs generally are impractical for use in removing or discouraging snakes outdoors around homes. One simple method sometimes used in field research is placing boards (example: one to two feet square) on the ground surface, then checking under the boards periodically for snakes. Snakes come to the boards because they provide suitable shelter, but in backyard situations such boards add snake cover and might attract them rather than help control them.

Another type of trap uses long drift fences (example: 25 feet long by two feet high) that guide snakes to a funnel-entrance holding cage. Drift fence traps generally are too cumbersome around homes but, if of interest, a design is available at Extension offices in the reference handbook, *Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage*, snake chapters.

Removal From Around a Home. Persistent removal of snakes encountered around a home can reduce their numbers effectively. Snakes can be killed with a long handled hoe or club and, where permitted, by shooting. When desired, nonpoisonous snakes can be captured and transported a distance for release into a suitable habitat.

Other Methods. Some dogs kill snakes and many others detect snakes and give warning by barking and other behavior. Turkeys are reported to be proficient at locating snakes and at giving alarm through gobbling and clustering around the snake. Some cats kill snakes, and geese, ducks and chickens kill and eat snakes of sizes they can manage, poisonous or nonpoisonous. Some birds such as blue jays and others also may sound alarm or scolding calls when a snake is detected.

Be alert to the behavior of your dog or cat and other animals. Observing their behavior in the presence of a snake will help you know how they behave when a snake is detected, and thus may provide you an extra snake alert.

Thank You Snakes

Venom from poisonous snakes is used in medical research and has been beneficial to people in unexpected ways. One recent example is a successful and widely-used high blood pressure medicine that was developed using the chemical pattern of a snake venom as a guide. Other research is testing snake poisons for use in treating blood and heart problems and in controlling harmful bacteria. Many snakes also kill and eat rats, mice, insects, gophers, and other animals that often are considered pests. Snakes can capture these in burrows or under cover where other predators can't.

Snakes probably won't eliminate pests, but they do help keep numbers in check. King snakes and milk snakes commonly eat other snakes, including poisonous ones. Overall, snakes are an important part of our natural world. If you want to do the best by yourself and snakes, try the natural way -- just leave them alone.

Suggested Reading

Behler, J. L., and F. W. King. 1979.

The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Reptiles and Amphibians. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 743pp. This guide uses quality color photographs to illustrate each snake, usually with some background habitat included. Photographs don't always present an animal in the best position for identification but generally this is not a problem. The text includes descriptions of each species along with good life history information and range maps.

Conant, R. 1975.

A Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians, Eastern and Central North America, second edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 429pp. This guide, which covers all of Nebraska, has excellent color illustrations that include small arrows to point out special identifying features. It includes general information about snakes, descriptions of each species, and range maps.

Lynch, J. D. 1985.

Annotated Checklist of the Amphibians and Reptiles of Nebraska. Transactions of the Nebraska Academy of Science 13:33-57. This article includes excellent maps that show locations in Nebraska where each type of snake is known to occur, along with some information on identification and abundance.

San Julian, G. J., and D. K. Woodward. 1985.

What You Wanted to Know About All You Ever Heard Concerning Snake Repellents. Proc. Eastern Wildlife Damage Control Conference 2:33-241. A scientific but readable article describing studies of home remedies as snake repellents; none were effective.

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