

Audubon at Home in Northern Virginia

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Black Rat Snake Kevin Munroe

Snakes – Black Rat, Garter, Rough Green and Ring-necked

Snakes are probably the most misunderstood and underappreciated of Northern Virginia's wildlife. Of the many snake species found in our area, only the copperhead is poisonous and it lives in large, upland forests, rarely venturing into people's yards. Most of our snakes are non-venomous, harmless and purely beneficial. Garter snakes are identifiable by the 3 yellow stripes running the length of the body, one down the middle and one on each side. Ring-necked snakes are small, thin and dark-colored except for the ring around the neck, ranging in color from cream to red. Sometimes the ring is absent. Adult rough greens are solid pea-green while juveniles are gray-green. Black rat snakes, adult pictured at left, start life sporting a pattern of light gray with black patches. An extremely important ingredient in our local food web, these beautiful, fascinating and helpful reptiles should be a welcome addition to any Audubon At Home landscape. They live in various habitats including forests, meadows and wetlands and their populations are in serious decline due to habitat destruction, lawn mowers, outdoor cats and roads.

What Snakes Need

Food: Black Rat Snakes eat rodents and occasionally birds, while Rough Green, Garter and Ringneck Snakes feed on insects, earthworms, slugs, amphibians and other small creatures found under logs and on plants. All these non-venomous species love meadows.

Breeding: Black Rat, Rough Green and Ringneck snakes lay eggs, while Garter Snakes give birth to live young. All four species need rotting logs and stumps, rocks, leaf litter, brush and shrubby undergrowth as hiding places for their eggs and young.

Shelter: Snakes love brush, dense meadows, understory shrubs, brambles, fallen logs, standing dead trees and rock outcrops.

Other: Glue traps kill many beneficial wildlife species, including these wonderful reptiles. Lawn mowers cause the death of hundreds of snakes every year and at least as many end up as road kill. In addition, many harmless young snakes meet their ends as a cat's chew-toy.

Resources:

Plants—available at Merrifield Garden Center, Hyla Brook Farm, Nature By Design, DeBaggio Herbs and other local nurseries

Model Snake Habitats:

Riverbend Park—www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/riverbend/
 Huntley Meadows Park—www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/huntley/
 Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve—www.bansheereeks.org/

How You Can Help

- Plant dense stands of native shrubs or mini hedgerows for Rough Green and Garter Snakes to hunt for insects and sun themselves.
- Grow native wildflowers and grasses in a sunny corner of your property. Mow it in the winter when snakes are hibernating to maintain it as a mini wildflower meadow.
- Provide a brush shelter with logs, rocks and branches to give them a place to sleep, hide, hunt and bask in the sun. Be sure that at least a portion of your shelter receives full sun and add a few old pipes or boards to seal the deal.
- Standing and fallen dead trees are important habitat for these rodent and insect eating machines. Resist the temptation to “tidy-up” your property by removing all dead wood.
- Never use glue traps of any kind. If a snake ends up in an inappropriate spot (garage, basement, etc.) simply use a broom and trash can to move it unharmed back to its mini-meadow or brush shelter.
- Reduce the area on your property that's mowed.
- Fight roads that cut through natural areas.
- Minimize or eliminate the time your cats roam outside.

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