

Snakes in Southern Myths and Folklore

Perhaps no other animals have been the object of so much fear, misinformation, and misunderstanding as snakes. The following is a list of common southern myths regarding snakes and snake behavior and some possible explanations for these tales.

Snakes chase people.

FALSE! Many people who have spent time outdoors have a story about being chased by snakes. But



herpetologists, people who study reptiles and amphibians, never seem to have this

experience—they find that snakes are always trying to escape. To understand this perceived behavior of a snake chasing someone, one must first realize that a snake has nothing to gain by chasing a person. A snake obviously could not eat a person and so is not looking for food. They are not vengeful and do not chase people out of sheer hate.

Rattlesnakes always add one rattle a year.

FALSE! A rattlesnake adds one rattle every time it sheds its skin. Snakes may shed several times in the



course of a year, each time adding a new rattle; rattles also may break off. Determining a snake's age by counting rattles usually results in an inaccurate estimate of the snake's age.

Snakes travel in pairs, the survivor seeking revenge if one is killed.

FALSE! Snakes do not travel in groups or pairs. They do not have any social bonds and would feel in no way vengeful if one of their number were to be killed. One possible explanation for this myth is that in a prime



habitat situation, multiple snakes of the same species could be encountered in a relatively small

area. Another explanation could be related to typical reproductive behavior. During the mating season a male snake will trail a female snake much as a buck deer trails a doe during the rut. In either situation, one may make the incorrect assumption that the second snake seen was out for revenge.

A snake must coil before it can strike.

FALSE! Snakes can bite or strike from any position.

Coiling does, however, increase the distance that a snake can strike.



Snakes go blind during the dog days of August.

FALSE! Snakes must shed their skins in order to grow. To help the old skin slide off, a gray-white lubricant is secreted under the old skin. This liquid is visible under the clear scale that protects the eye, making it look clouded over. This does, in fact, impair a snake's vision. Although snakes are not known to shed any more in August than in any other summer month, shedding blindness is the probable origin of this myth.

