



Brown House Snake (Boaedon capensis)

SHARING OUR SPACE WITH SNAKES

By: Francois Swart

We are indeed fortunate to have so many indigenous animal species living in our suburban areas. The natural diversity in our towns and cities proves that it is possible to live, to a large extent, in harmony with animals. Reptiles and snakes are maybe some of the less known, less understood, and more feared creatures that share our living space. These marvelous animals are however highly beneficial to our ecosystem, as snakes are valuable contributors to keeping rodent and amphibian populations under control. It is therefore important for us to protect snakes and conserve their habitat instead of killing them outright. We have to address the old false beliefs about snakes and reptiles.

It is important though to understand that the risk of snake bites is a real threat to people living in South Africa even though relatively few of the 170 species of snakes found here are venomous. Most snakes are extremely timid creatures and are only likely to defend themselves if cornered or provoked, attack is in most instances simply a form of defense.

The required treatment for a snake bite varies from species to species and being able to identify the species of snake that has bitten someone is an important part of the procedure. You can learn more about some of South Africa's more common snakes in some of the good quality publications and field guides that are available from major book retailers.

In this article, I would like to give some recommendations with regards to our interaction with snakes.

Minimize the risk of snake bites:

Most snake bites are caused by accidentally stepping onto a snake, especially if you are out walking in the garden, grassland or the bush. It is nearly impossible to predict or prevent but by taking a few simple, but sensible precautions you can reduce the risk.

- Wear strong boots or shoes and long trousers when walking in grassland
- NEVER walk about barefoot – especially at night!
- Avoid long grass and stick to paths and tracks as much as possible
- Use a long stick to 'probe' the ground ahead of you; be aware that some snakes can sham death as a defense mechanism so do not attempt to touch a snake that appears dead
- Walk in single file through long grass or the bush
- Climb on to large rocks or logs in the pathway rather than stepping over them as these are favourite haunts for snakes
- Watch where you put your hands and NEVER put them down a hole. Never put your hands and feet where you cannot see.
- Do not attempt to touch, catch, kill or corner a snake
- When in the bush, use a mosquito net at night and tuck it in tightly. Never sleep on the ground

- unless you have a tent with an attached and built in ground sheet
- Always use a torch to light the ground ahead of you at night
- If you see a snake stand absolutely still and then slowly back away, the snake will not advance to attack you. Do remember though that some snakes can strike up to a third of their length.
- When entering garages, sheds, storerooms and other outbuildings open the door, light the internal area and visually check for snakes remembering that you will, in all likelihood, be blocking their exit.
- Treat all snakes with respect and never touch or attempt to pick up a snake!
- Do not try to kill a snake, many bites occur because people aggravate snakes.

Minimise the risk of snakes in gardens and around houses:

Before looking at ways to prevent snakes getting in to your house you should ensure that your garden is not a haven for snakes to take up residence because they would then be much more likely to make their way into your house, garage or any outbuildings you may have.

- Long grass is a favourite habitat of snakes so keep yours well mowed.
- Remove all clutter, rubble and unwanted timber and rubbish as these make good hiding places and might attract rodents which are prey items for snakes.
- Also keep refuse areas clean as they attract rodents which are food for snakes.
- Keep shrubs trimmed round their base and away from the house
- Keep garages and sheds clean and clutter free.
- Ensure that branches of trees do not overhang your house or seating areas in your garden
- Stack your wood on a suitable platform – such as a pallet – off the ground.
- Regularly sweep up leaves and other garden debris.
- Fill gaps, cracks and crevices in brick and stone walls
- Wooden decking in seating areas can be solid, rather than slatted, to prevent snakes climbing through it.
- Be aware that play areas such as wendy-houses, tree houses, sand pits etc. are potential harborage for snakes
- Compost heaps could potentially attract many different species of wildlife which, in turn, may become the prey of a snake. Ensure that your compost is made in a sealed and solid structure, preferably raised off the ground, and can be securely sealed against any wildlife but particularly rodents.

'Proof' your house or building against occasional animal intruders:

Are you aware that snakes, particularly the thinner ones, can get in to your home through a gap the size of pencil – as can small rodents! Also remember that snakes and rodents can swim and climb so carefully inspect your house, garage and all outbuildings. You may purchase any number of DIY Products to help you seal any obvious entry points.

What to look for when inspecting your property:

- Do you have screens on your windows and doors? Are there gaps around the frame or holes in the actual screening?
- Do you have gaps under doors in & out of the house, garage doors, shed doors? If so, bristle or sealing strips can be an effective way to seal these.
- Are there any holes, cracks or crevices in the brick or plaster work of your house?
- Are there any holes, cracks and crevices between patio areas or pathways and your house? – Drainage areas are also perfect points of entry.
- Is the gauge size of any grates covering your drains small enough to stop snakes or rodents going down it?
- Make sure that there are no holes in your roof that snakes or rodents can get through – particularly if trees overhang your house.
- Ensure skirting boards do not have gaps under or behind them
- Seal all holes where wiring, plumbing or gas enters your home
- Cover gutters and drain pipes with fine gauge mesh
- If your home has wooden floorboards ensure that access to the floor space beneath them is sealed and that gaps between the boards themselves are filled.

For any enthusiasts that would like learn more there are various accredited training courses on an ongoing basis. The courses cover Snake Awareness, Snake Identification, Snake Bite First Aid and Venomous Snake Handling. Please contact me, Francois Swart, on 082 5617307 should you want to attend a course.

Remember, if you do find a snake in your garden, house or building, please do not kill it. Leave it alone but be aware of its whereabouts at all times and call a specialist to relocate it.



Snake Handling and Removal Demonstration