# Use common sense to avoid bugs, critters

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The State

Aaah, summer, there's so much to like about you — summer vacations, summer romances, "Summer time and the livin' is easy."

Oooh, summer, there's so much about you that's scary — mosquitoes, sharks, "I don't like spiders and snakes."

You can simply balance the good against the bad of summer, or you can take the upbeat approach. Serious problems with those scary creatures are statistically rare. And the likelihood of summer critter problems can be reduced with a little preparation and common sense.

So here are a few of the summer threats in South Carolina, and the reasons we shouldn't let them keep us cowering in air-conditioned homes until late September.

## Mosquitoes

You've probably heard that mosquitoes are the deadliest creatures on the planet. But while mosquito-borne malaria is a major killer worldwide, it's extremely rare in the U.S. There were 1,925 cases of malaria in the U.S. in 2011, and almost all who contracted the disease had recently traveled overseas. South Carolina does have plenty of mosquitoes, however, and some carry the less deadly but still serious West Nile virus.

**True danger:** The S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control reported seven confirmed cases of West Nile virus in humans in the state in 2013, down from 41 cases in 2012. The state has had five West Nile-related deaths since 1999. West Nile causes noticeable symptoms in about 20 percent of people who are infected, and severe symptoms including encephalitis or meningitis in about 1 percent.

**Tips:** Use bug repellent, wear long sleeves and long pants when going to mosquito-prone areas, avoid going outside around dawn and dusk. Empty receptacles where water might collect in your yard, since mosquitoes leave their eggs in stagnant water.

## Snakes

There are four types of venomous snakes in the U.S. — rattlesnakes, copperheads, cottonmouths/water moccasins and coral snakes. All four can be found in South Carolina.

**True danger:** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that 7,000-8,000 people nationwide suffer bites by venomous snakes each year, but only about five die. Rapid medical care after bites usually saves lives. South Carolina hasn't had a snake-bite death in years.

**Tips:** Leave them alone. The vast majority of bites occur when people try to handle snakes. Also, avoid tall grass and piles of leaves or wooded debris. Wear boots and long pants when in the forest, and use gloves if handling brush or debris.

## Sharks

There are plenty of sharks among dozens of species cruising the state's coastal waters. They generally ignore humans, which aren't among their standard diet. Shark experts say most bites along the South Carolina coast involve sharks feeding on smaller marine creatures and accidentally hitting a swimmer's foot or lower leg.

**True danger:** The International Shark Attack File, compiled through the Florida Museum of Natural History, lists 77 unprovoked shark attacks in South Carolina waters from 1837-2013. Six of those were in an unusually busy 2013. The only known S.C. shark attack fatality in the state was in 1852 off Morris Island.

**Tips:** If you must avoid all sharks, stay out of saltwater. If you love swimming in the ocean, it's prudent to avoid swimming by yourself and around dusk and at night, when sharks are more likely to be feeding.

## Alligators

Gator populations in South Carolina have been on the rise for decades, and the recent advent of a limited gator hunting season has barely impacted those numbers. Fixtures in coastal golf course ponds for years, they've recently begun wandering into neighborhood streets and shopping centers in the Lowcountry.

**True danger:** State wildlife officials say there are no confirmed alligator attack deaths on record in South Carolina. Even in Florida, it's been five years since the last known gator attack death. Gator bites caused serious foot injuries for a woman walking dogs near a pond in Hilton Head last August and a woman fishing at Hilton Head in May 2012. In the most infamous S.C. incident in recent years, a gator severed the arm of a Summerville man swimming in Lake Moultrie in 2007.

**Tips:** Don't feed gators. If you see a gator, give it plenty of space. Avoid swimming in water with lots of vegetation, where gators like to live.

## Spiders

Brown recluse and black widows are the venomous spiders common in South Carolina. The recluse, as its name indicates, hides out in dark areas such as holes, brush piles and even boots left on the porch. Black widows, identifiable by the red hourglass on their abdomen, also like to build webs in dark places.

**True danger:** Many thousands of people in the U.S. are bitten by these two species each year. Their toxin is strong, but fortunately they don't pack the toxin in large volume. Among those thousands of bites, about 2,800 people each year are treated in health care facilities for spider bites, and only two deaths related to brown recluse or black widows were reported in the country from 2008-2012, according to the American Association of Poison Control Centers.

**Tips:** Wear gloves when clearing brush or wood piles. Shake out shoes and clothing that have been sitting on the ground before putting them on. Clear junk out of yards and away from the walls of houses.