

Sssetting the record ssstraight

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South Cove County Park superintendent Stephen Schutt taught a class at the park on Wednesday afternoon to teach people about snakes, which he said get a bad rap because of "misinformation from media and TV sources."

South Cove program dispels misinformation on snakes

BY LAUREN PIERCE
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — South Cove County Park superintendent Stephen Schutt said he understands the hesitancy some people have when it comes to seeing snakes around Oconee County, because he used to be afraid of "nope ropes" as a child.

But now he owns snakes as pets and even taught a class on them at the park Wednesday afternoon. Schutt told the class most people's fear of snakes — or ophidiophobia — stems from having a negative childhood experience with the reptile or a lack of education.

"About 40 percent of the world's population has a fear of snakes at some point," he said. "If you were a small kid and you stepped on a snake, got bitten by a snake, threatened by a snake, hissed at by a snake, or ... a snake fell off as they were walking out the door and on top of them, they now have a fear of snakes. ... But a lot of it is misinformation from media and TV sources."

Schutt pointed out that historically, snakes have always been associated with death, poison or disease — like Medusa in Greek mythology, the story of Adam and Eve or unrealistic artistic depictions.



South Cove County Park superintendent Stephen Schutt lets a participant in Wednesday's class pet Maisie, a corn snake. Corn snakes are one of 38 species of snake found in the wild in South Carolina.

However, snakes are a very important part of the food web.

"They are carnivores. Typically, carnivores are on top of the food chain; snakes are not, but they do control things such as mice and

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rats," Schutt said. "They keep populations under control."

SNAKES FOUND IN OCOREE COUNTY

Thirty-eight species of snakes live in South Carolina, of which only six are venomous, according to Schutt.

He said most people will never see a lot of the snakes in the state — mainly because some live underground, are secluded or are small — but most of the 38 species can still be found in Oconee County.

A few of the commonly found reptiles in the area include brown snakes, eastern worm snakes, rat snakes, ringneck snakes

and copperhead snakes.

"We have copperheads around here. This is the venomous snake 99 percent of the time in the Upstate you're going to see," Schutt said, pointing to a photo of a copperhead. "What you really need to notice is this hourglass pattern."

He said there are a few ways to tell if a snake is venomous or not, but his first recommendation is to not get close enough to find out.

Typically, but not always, a venomous snake will have a more triangle-shaped head, elliptical pupils, heat-sensing pit, a single row of subcaudal plates on its tail and retractable fangs, Schutt said. Non-venomous snakes usually have a rounder

head, round pupils, no heat-sensing pit, a double row of subcaudal plates on its tail and no fangs.

"There are exceptions to that rule. And I'm only talking about snakes here in South Carolina, so don't go to South America and think it's the same rule," Schutt said as the class laughed in response.

"Once you know what you're looking for, you'll never mistake it," he added.

If someone happens to cross paths with a snake in the area and gets bitten, Schutt said it certainly helps medical personnel to know what kind of snake was the culprit. If unsure whether the snake was venomous or not, Schutt said patients will more than likely end up with a generic

copperhead antivenom treatment in Oconee.

The number of people who die from a snake bite in the U.S. each year is very low, Schutt said — usually about 15 to 30 people a year.

BUSTING SNAKE MYTHS

Thanks to unrealistic portrayals over time, many myths have developed about the not-actually-slimy reptile.

Schutt said one of the most common myths that people believe is that snakes chase people.

"I will tell you right now there's not a snake in the world that's going to chase you, because it's just as scared of you as you are of them," he said. "You are their predator; you can kill them. Now,

that's going to chase you'

if you start running from a snake and the snake freaks out, too, and that's the way it knows to escape, y'all are going to go in the same pattern."

Other common myths about snakes include:

- Snakes can sting with their tails
- Snakes can bite their tail and form a wheel to

roll away or after you

- Snakes cannot strike underwater

• You can tell how old a rattlesnake is by how many rattles it has

- Snakes eat people

"Don't believe everything you read on the internet," Schutt said.

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