

# Herping for Snakes – Herping Tips – Southeast Asia



Dog-toothed Cat Snake, a rather rare snake in Southern Thailand.

## Herping for Snakes – Tips and Tricks

I was going to write about our annual **SnakeStalk 2017** herping field trip coming up in June 2017, but then I thought it'd be more fun writing some tips for people herping on their own who never get to come to one of these Thailand events.

I've been looking for snakes for about ten years in Thailand. I've herped with a couple hundred people. Sometimes I picked up tips from them, but I certainly don't know it all at this point. If you have any tips for this article – let me know in

the comments and I'll add them in an update. These tips are applicable to all of Southeast Asia, but then maybe not so generalizable to other areas of the world because the snakes are different from place to place. That said, you might find some gems here even if you're looking for rattlesnakes in Texas.

[What is Field Herping](#) for Snakes?

## **A Good Herping Headlamp is a Must**

Besides having two eyes in your head, having a great headlamp is the most important tool you can have for herping for snakes. I went with cheap lights with high lumens for a couple of years, and was happy enough in my ignorance. Then I herped with David Frohlich. He had a headlamp that lit up the entire forest. I saw a massive difference between that sort of light, and mine with a tight beam, and quickly went to work testing a bunch of flashlights and headlamps. I now have a few favorites. They're expensive, but there's nothing I've found with the same quality of light or durability.

### **The 3 Best Herping Headlamps?**

- Petzl [Nao 2](#) – have this and love it – very similar to the newer Nao+ below.
- Petzl [Nao+](#) – have this and love it.
- Petzl [Ultra Rush](#) – my ultimate, I have 2 of them! A new headlamp is coming out – the Petzl DUO S. I have a pre-review [here now](#).

## **Snake Tongs or Snake Hook?**

Maybe not either. If you don't have experience handling venomous snakes – please don't touch any snake you are not very familiar with. By familiar with, I mean you know what the snake is capable of. That's even a stretch... I don't know what

king cobras are capable of. I haven't seen it all. I got surprised a couple years back by a king cobra hiding behind a log, and then launching itself up at the cage door. It nearly owned the guy I was with.

If you don't know all the snakes you're going to encounter – and know them WELL – please don't be poking them with a snake hook or snake tongs. It's a recipe for disaster.

If you are going to buy tongs – there are tons of absolute junk on the market. Get some of these originals which many companies are copying. These are gentle on the snakes and offer a safe grip.

## **Which Is My Favorite Herping Headlamp (2015-2016)?**

**Update January 2018** – Today my favorite headlamps have changed. Same brand – Petzl. But the ULTRA RUSH is the ultimate herping headlamp. It is pretty close to perfect. It's expensive, but should last for 10 yrs or so. You can find them at my <https://Headlamps101.com> site.

Petzl Nao 2 – 575 lumens. It has a flood and a tighter beam I hesitate to call a spotlight – it's more a condensed floodlight. It's quite nice. Price is around \$150. Petzl just released their successor to this light – and call it the Petzl Nao Plus. I think it's 750 max lumens. Battery life at maximum power – around same. My **review is here**.

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Check them out here:

## How To Find Snakes Quick?

If you just want to go out and find something in Thailand or SE Asia, I think your best chance is at night with a very good headlamp (torch, flashlight). So, hopefully you've taken care of that above. It's absolutely essential to be throwing enough light out there to get snake scales and even eyes reflecting back.

If I wanted to find a couple snakes in an hour, I'd go to any hill that borders a road, and I'd scan the trees from 1 meter to 3 meters high for sleeping tree snakes – whip snakes. Oriental Whip Snakes, Malayan Whip Snakes, Bronzeback Snakes, Golden Tree Snakes and others in the Genus. These snakes are really common in most places in Thailand. You'll see their venter (belly) reflecting light from underneath, or you can notice their different color against the green leaves they sometimes lay right on top of to sleep. Once you find one sleeping, start looking at that same elevation off the ground for the rest of them, they're probably at a similar height.

I've also noticed that larger – full-grown adult Oriental Whip Snakes tend to sleep around the 2-3 meters and higher range. The smaller snakes are from 1-2 meters high off the ground typically.

## What Weather Conditions are Favorable for Snake Herping?

I see most snakes on nights in Southern Thailand when 3 conditions are present:

1. **Humidity.** If the air is too dry – under around 50%, the chance of seeing a huge variety of snakes, drops considerably. Ideally it's 80-100% humidity, but not raining. If it's [raining](#), you'll still see some snakes, but only a few species are seen regularly during rain.
2. **Heat.** In Southern Thailand we have what seems like an average night temperature of 28-30°C. I see far more snakes when the temperature is over 28°C.
3. **Calm Winds.** If it's very windy, I see very little in the way of snakes, or anything else. I think the snakes go into the forest deeper to escape being tossed around on the branches as they sleep. I also think the blowing debris – leaves mostly – scare the snakes – put them on edge, and they can't relax. Just an idea... maybe?!

There are likely other variables which can add to what I have above, but I don't regularly monitor anything else. Probably a falling barometer means you'll find less snakes. If there is a full-moon, you may find some snakes, and not others. I haven't logged enough of my finds (only 100 or so) to the degree needed to figure out which snakes are found more often during certain moon phases.

I mentioned 'heat' in #2 above. If the temperature is only around 22°C at night you may still find snakes. Especially if the daylight hours were much warmer – and warmed up the

ground, streets, rocks, etc.

There is probably a good range of temperature preference for snakes from the deep south, vs. Chiang Rai area in the far north. Here in Krabi, if it's over 28°C, I'm much more likely to go out and see what I can find because I think the probability is higher to find a higher number of and variety of snakes.

I have had many amazing nights when the 3 factors above were present. I have never had a great night with low humidity, cool temperature, and strong wind.

## **Flipping Junk**

Herpers across the globe flip over junk of all sorts and find snakes. I never do. No wait, I've found a gliding gecko, an *E. enhydris*, and a Brahminy Blind Snake. I've spoken with many people who've herped other areas of Thailand and Southeast Asia – and the reports are the same. Few snakes found this way. Still, being from Western Pennsylvania, where we could turn up animals all the time like this – I can't pass up a nice sheet of roofing or cardboard. Scorpions are typically under junk we flip here.

## **How to Herp for Snakes?**

So, how does one actually go out and look for snakes?

Some people prefer looking on the ground. Some like looking up in the trees. Some like flipping stuff and raking leaves. Some like road-cruising. I like all of these, but it really depends primarily on what I'm looking for. I usually have an idea which snakes I'm focusing on for the night, so I can limit where I'm looking. It's really tiresome to look everywhere – all habitat for snakes. Better to focus on 1-2 areas because you'll last longer.

## Tips for Looking for Snakes in Trees

This is quite easy once you learn what you're looking for. It can be easy to pick out certain snakes by their shape. They're always curved – and tree branches are usually straighter and angular. The colors of the snake can also stand out against green leaf backgrounds once you have it in your head what to look for.

I generally look between 1 and 4 meters up a tree for snakes. Some will be higher, but it's tiring to check out the entire vertical height of a tree. Most will be in the lower branches, and you likely won't be able to reach or identify anything very high up – so why bother looking up there?

[How to Catch Snakes in Trees](#) >

## Tips for Looking for Snakes on the Ground

Snakes in the middle of the street, on a path, or sidewalk, are easy to see. Sometimes looking for snakes on the ground is easier than looking in the trees. When there is wide-open ground, I look there primarily. When there is grass or other vegetation that would make spotting snakes difficult, I'll tend to focus on the trees for sleeping or moving snakes (coming down the tree trunks).



Malayan pit viper – toxic landmine – waiting for rodents or frogs.

## **Tips for Looking for Snakes while Road-Cruising**

Probably the easiest way to herp ever, is road-cruising. I like to do it from my motorbike. I'm faster off the bike and faster to get where I see a snake than in a car or other vehicle. I also can hear dogs coming or other cars – I'm just more aware while road-cruising on the scooter than in a vehicle. I can sometimes block the snake from getting off the road if I pull in front of it too – with a car, the snake could go up into the engine and you'll lose it.

## **Tips for Finding Snakes in Specific Genera**

Where snakes are found differs quite a bit depending when you're herping. I'll give you tips for finding various types of snakes below during daytime and nighttime hours.

### **Cat Snakes**



- Day – Hiding in the tops of palm trees. I know [B. cynodon](#) and [B. dendrophila](#) are both fond of sleeping in the palms about 5-6 meters up off the ground.
- Night – Mangrove cat snakes (*B. dendrophila*) come down to the ground around water and look for frogs where I herp. It's a freshwater stream. They are also found in trees above saltwater, brackish water during the days and come down at night to find prey. Dog-toothed cat snakes (*B. cynodon*) can be found coming down palm trees, and crossing ground in dry areas or areas with water. I have also found this species crossing roads in hard rain at night. I've found them late at night – around midnight, most often.

### [Keelbacks](#)

- Night – The triangle keelback (*X. trianguligerus*) is active at night, almost always in water, or in mud next to water, looking for frogs. They are light-sensitive, and will probably move when the light hits them. Their eyes can reflect slightly.
- Day – [Red-necked keelbacks](#) (*R. subminiatus*) are found in grass and other vegetation close to streams. The speckle-bellied keelback, common keelback, the blue-necked keelback, and others are all found within close proximity to water.

### [King Cobras](#)

- Day – If hungry or mating, they roam a lot. Still I have never seen a king cobra in 12 yrs, crossing a road during the daytime. But the juveniles do in June / July. I've found king cobras on hills three times while herping.
- Night – I have found one king cobra at 7:15 pm. at night cruising around a freshwater stream. I may have seen another on a road near homes and rubber tree plantation – huge – solid black. Hard to say, but then the [keeled](#)

[rat snake](#) (*Ptyas carinatus*), the only other snake it might've been, is not known to be active at night at that hour (around midnight). Finding king cobras is hit or miss. You can't really target them, except by just covering huge distances on hills during the days.

More on [how to find a king cobra](#) in Thailand >

## Kraits

- Day – I think the [Banded kraits](#) (*B. fasciatus*) sleep in the palm trees. I have heard stories of people bitten during the day while climbing up oil palms to collect the seeds.
- Night – [Malayan kraits](#) (*B. candidus*) are known to be very active at night. I've seen over 100 of them at night. They like limestone rocks, the edges of sidewalks, culverts, and they look into all sorts of little holes where other snakes might be hiding / sleeping. Banded kraits – not sure.

## Kukri Snakes

- Day – I get quite a few requests to identify kukri snakes crawling around the edges of people's homes during the day.
- Night – Haven't found them sleeping. But, they're probably sleeping in thick vegetation, just off the ground, so I wouldn't be able to see them at night.

## Monocled and Spitting Cobras

- Day – I see [monocled cobras](#) (*Naja kaouthia*) crossing the road during the hottest part of the day – around 3 pm. most often. It's almost always within 30 minutes of 3 pm.! The spitting cobras? It's a crap-shoot. Not sure anyone knows how to target them, but David Frohlich in Hua Hin has a place he finds them regularly.
- Night – I rarely find monocled cobras at night, and

don't know how to target them, sometimes BAM, they're just there.

## Pit Vipers

- Day – [Malayan pit vipers](#) are in the leaves sleeping – sometimes on top, or under the leaves. They probably also sleep between rocks and in holes. I found one sleeping on my concrete porch, in the wide open one afternoon around 2 pm. No leaves on the porch – just one big pit viper outside the door of my little daughter.
- Night – Snakes in the *Trimeresurus* genus sit in one spot waiting to ambush a frog, or skink. Malayan pit vipers can be very close to houses, or on hills with primary forest. They target rodents primarily, but will eat frogs.

## Rat Snakes

- Day – I see them ([Radiated rat snake](#), [Red-tailed racer](#), [Indo-Chinese rat snake](#)) most often crossing roads – especially coming from water run-off areas of dirt – near palm plantations, and out of high grass. I've seen them chase lizards out of the high grass and onto the street a couple times. [Ptyas carinatus](#) I find on dirt trails in disturbed primary forest from 60 meters ASL to 300 meters ASL.
- Night – Radiated rat snakes I've found sleeping about a meter off the ground in sparse bushes. Red-tailed racers are 3+ meters off the ground and wrapped in a tight ball on trees. *Ptyas carinatus* have been found sleeping on bent bamboo 4-5 meters off the ground.

## [Reticulated Pythons](#)

- Day – Found sleeping high up in trees, or in roofs of bungalows or other structures. I've also found them curled up in a ball on big tree stumps twice in the middle of the day.

- Night – Active on rainy nights whether it's warm or cool. Can be seen crossing roads frequently after 9 pm. when raining.

### Whip Snakes and Bronzebacks

- Day – Whip snakes will typically be on a tree around 2 meters high – open to the air. Meaning, a wide open space in front of the tree. They are targeting birds. I've also seen whip snakes on nature trails in the heat of the morning or early afternoon – just frozen there, waiting for me to step over them. I've found bronzebacks in trees in the same sort of position, and also on top of walls yards, and on thick branches close to the ground.
- Night – Very easy to spot in the trees sleeping. Typically 1-2 meters off the ground, but the bigger snakes (adults) will usually be found higher off the ground.



D. cyanochloris – Wall's Bronzeback.

### **Wolf Snakes**

- Day – Must be sleeping in trees (some of them) and others ([L. capucinus](#)) are probably sleeping under something on the ground.

- Night – Roaming around houses and bungalows on the edge of forest especially. Look for movement in and on top of leaf litter especially.

## Which Months Are Best for Herping Thailand?

This is an easy one. I catch far more snakes from May through November most years. I say most years because the weather varies wildly here in Krabi some years. This year, a week ago, we had serious flooding all over Southern Thailand. We never have heavy rain this late. So, snake season fluctuates a bit too. We'll see how the next 4 months go and that may dictate the season a bit.

Here's more info about the [best months for herping](#) in Thailand.

[Herping in Rain](#) info >