

What Is It About Snakes?



Beautiful and dangerous. Once thought harmless, the red-necked keelback snake has been found to have potentially deadly venom which causes renal failure.

I don't know if I'd call myself a snake lover or snake nut anymore. At one time, yes, I definitely was. I still enjoy finding them, shooting some video and photos of them and letting them go. I don't keep any snakes. I'm not a snake nut like some guys I know (Tom, Rupert, David, you know who you are!).

I'm a lover of nature for sure. I really enjoy interacting with all sorts of wildlife here in Thailand, and I've had the good fortune to do that for over ten years now. Growing up in Pennsylvania and spending years in Hawaii, I didn't have many opportunities to see any exotic wildlife. Exotic like king cobras, kraits, vipers, a variety of scorpions, tarantulas, massive centipedes, slow loris climbing through the trees, etc.

I'm definitely in the right place for reptiles, amphibians, and bugs of all sorts.

But, what is it particularly that I love about snakes?

I've sort of asked myself that over the years. There are many different things that interest me about snakes, so I'll try to pull them all together here.

I caught snakes in my grandmother's back yard. Rarely I caught them, usually I just went down to her rock wall to see if one might be sunning itself. If the air was cool and the sun was shining bright, I'd often see a garter or ribbon snake there. I remember catching them not so often there because they were

just so fast back into the rocks when they saw me coming.

I do remember at that age (11?) being fascinated with just seeing the garter and ribbon snakes. I knew a bit about them from the National Geographic "World" magazine my aunt had bought me a subscription to. I knew they couldn't kill me. I knew that other snakes, could. That was really intriguing. I didn't know any birds that could kill me. Even a dog would have a tough time to kill me. We don't have any insects in Pennsylvania that could kill a person in a couple hours with a bite.

We had rattlesnakes and copperheads in Pennsylvania. I managed to avoid them for the most part, but I do have one instance that comes to mind. A friend named Greg – now diseased – brought a snake in a jar up to my house when I was about 14 years old. We let it out on the grass to watch it move. It had bitten Greg on the finger, and luckily it was a dry bite because when I looked it up in my magazines later, we found out it was a juvenile copperhead. Lucky Greg!

After letting it go in the grass, we promptly lost it! It sensed freedom and took off fast! We were both afraid to grab it, and again – lucky for us that we were afraid!

Mom was a bit upset at me for losing the snake in the yard. She was never quite the same about me bringing them back home after that. Go figure.

In Florida I saw some interesting snakes. A massive thick as my leg diamondback rattler crossed the street near my home in a subdivision in Oldsmar, Florida. It was so thick and strong, it was shocking. It crawled right out of a neighbor's yard. The neighbor had kids. Everyone looking at it contemplated killing it – but we let it go. I'm glad we did, and yet, if it had crawled out of my yard back then and I had kids – that snake would have become a lifeless mass in short-order.

I was a big brother in Tampa, Florida for a while. I used to

take one of "my kids" to the Hillsborough Park in Tampa to canoe in alligator infested waters, fish, and other fun stuff. Once, we were standing at a creek fishing when I walked over to him and looked down at his feet to see a coiled up copperhead just inches from his foot. "Don't MOVE!" I commanded. I then moved very slowly behind him and pulled him up and back away from the snake in an instant. He was scared to death when I showed him how close he had been to a bite.

Snakes can be very scary. They are quiet, stealthy, and deadly. That's quite a combination. Now that I know quite a bit about snakes, it makes them more interesting.

So, while I was fascinated about snakes back then, I wasn't infatuated with them. I could take them or leave them. I could kill a snake as easily as I killed a spider.

Not so today. Something has changed.

My first introduction to snakes in Thailand was in Phuket, at Surin Beach. I was on my way to the restroom and a group of Thais had just found a very large two-meter [monocled cobra](#) in the woman's restroom behind the squat toilet with a frog in its mouth.

They beat it to death, and I saw it up close. I couldn't believe such a deadly snake was right there in the restroom in mid-day. That was exciting!

The next snake I saw up-close was the viper shown in the header of this website. [Trimeresurus venustus](#). The "beautiful pit viper." My girlfriend at the time (wife now) and I walked right beside it while climbing steps at a temple in Surat Thani. We were shocked that we had walked so close to it on the way up the steps, because we didn't see it until we were coming down. It was just resting on these large leaves. It was exceptionally beautiful. I knew it was a viper, but didn't know just how venomous it was. I was still calling snakes "poisonous" back then.

That started my quest to find out everything I could about Thailand snakes. I started ThailandSnakes.com and ordered snake tongs and built a snake hook. The first snake I really caught was [Enhydris enhydris](#) in Surat Thani under some plastic in a large puddle at a Buddhist temple. That was pretty cool. I was instantly hooked. Though I knew little about herping for snakes, I did what I could. Long walks through snakey looking areas turned all sorts of snakes, lizards, and frogs up. Then I started going at night and found even more. I was really hooked.

I caught fifty different snake species or so while I was really nuts about snakes. Some of the videos are up at my YouTube snake channel, some are at my personal channel.

So, what is so amazing about snakes?

It isn't one thing. It's a combination of many things.

1. ***It's like fishing, but much more dangerous and hence, exciting.*** I loved fishing my whole life. I had a kayak in Tampa for ten years and would fish a few times a week, catching trout, redbird, cobia, tarpon, snook, flounder, sharks, ladyfish, bass, gar, and dozens more. Fishing was my life before I moved to Thailand and realized that shore fishing produced nothing bigger than about 6 inches. Or, catfish up to 600 lbs. No thanks! Finding snakes was much more fun.

2. ***Snakes have the coolest patterns.*** I've always been a really visual person. I love science. I love to think about how patterns in animals came about. When I first saw a mangrove cat-eyed snake (*Boiga dendrophila*) up close, I was speechless. The colors and patterns are amazing, brilliant, shocking. I have stared at these snakes over the years for hours I'm sure, just mesmerized by how cool they look! Funny, right?

Check out *Boiga jaspidea*, Wagler's pit viper ([T wagleri](#)), red-headed krait ([B flaviceps](#)), the dog-toothed cat snake ([B cynodon](#)), and the [mangrove pit viper](#) for some amazing patterns.

3. ***Some snakes are dangerous. Some are DEADLY.*** I think this is probably behind most of my motivation for finding and interacting with snakes – some of them can kill me with one bite. A drop or so of venom, expertly injected, can take me completely out of the human race. That's awesome, isn't it? I mean, you'd have to drink a couple ounces of gasoline to kill you – right? How much alcohol would you have to drink to kill you? A snake can kill you with one drop. That's so scary to me.

While fishing, as fun as it is, I didn't usually feel in fear for my life. The one time the shark grabbed the stringer of trout we tied around my girlfriend's neck while wade-fishing and the shark pulled us both to the deep – now that is the exception. Usually there is no real danger.

4. ***Snakes are unpredictable.*** Now if they're harmless and unpredictable, that's a mild thrill. If they're deadly and unpredictable, now that cranks it up a notch. Or two. The most exciting times I've had looking for, catching, and interacting with deadly snakes happened when they came damn close to biting me. The thrill of that is awesome, and yes, unnerving, but still. It's a quick shot of adrenaline that can really screw one up in the head. You think you liked it. It's bizarre, and yet, those few instances where I did something stupid, like resting my ass up against the king cobra cage while filming a video of a pipe snake in the sun, definitely count as some of the most memorable.

The time the Malayan pit viper ([Calloselasma rhodostoma](#)) launched itself at me from 5 feet high on my snake hook just as I was going to toss him away into some grass, still makes me wince.

The mangrove pit viper (*Trimeresurus purpureomaculatus*) which owned me outright when I tried to flick his tail with my foot, thinking he'd go faster away, and instead turned back at my foot in an instant without striking. Well, that was exciting, I'll tell you.

There's something cool about snakes because they appear so harmless. They have no arms or legs and they are usually slow movers. There's something so shocking about the lightning fast speed they can strike, and the positions some of them can strike from. I think this factors into a lot of people's fear about snakes. They move slow, they seem totally innocuous – until suddenly, they strike out and grab you. That's nuts!

5. ***Snakes are mysterious.*** There is endless folklore associated with snakes that still scares the pants off people. Fear of snakes is one of the most prevalent phobias among humans. Some people are so afraid that the very mention of the word 'snake' sends shivers up spines.

I still find snakes mysterious. Though there are many behaviors they have that are known, every now and then there is something surprising. Recently at a wilderness bungalow I heard birds going nuts. A look at the palm tree close by revealed the body of a massive [Coelognathus radiata](#) (a rat snake) about 12-15 feet up in the palm ransacking their nest. I'd never seen one of these snakes climb much of anything. They're *supposed* to be terrestrial, I've seen nearly every one I've encountered, on the ground. It pays to keep in mind that snake identification and informational books are often in error and it pays to be open to new facts as they present themselves!

6. ***New snakes and other wildlife are being discovered all the time.*** It's exciting to think that I might find something totally new and never described before. Happens all the time. It may have happened to me twice already. I've definitely seen two unidentified snakes. That's maybe even

more exciting than almost getting bitten by something.

7. ***I love alone time.*** I've always liked to be alone to think for extended periods of time. I guess that's at least part of why I'm an exercise fanatic. I can spend hours and days by myself, and love it. Looking for snakes in the rainforest in Thailand is usually a solo gig. I don't mind at all, it gives me an excuse to get out by myself.

8. ***Herping is scary.*** There's something scary as hell about walking in the pitch-black forest by yourself at midnight or beyond with only a flashlight and tongs. There are sounds in the forest that you just can't figure out. One time I heard, very close to me, the sound of something heavy or big very close to me. Just inching along. I guessed it was no more than a meter away, but the brush was too dense to see into even with the flashlight. I stood there for ten minutes trying to see it. It was invisible I guess. I never did figure it out. That's COOL!

Sometimes wild cat sounds are heard. Sometimes a slow loris in a tree can give a temporary scare. Trees fall occasionally. There's nothing quite like the splitting and splintering of a large tree that is announcing its death close by and you can't figure out which tree is falling, and where to run.

There's nothing quite like looking for snakes, and they find you first. I've had a snake crawl over my foot before I knew it was there. That gets the heart racing, I'll tell you.

A guy I know saw a small bear where I frequently herp. I don't want to see any bear, but I know it's inevitable at some point. I definitely don't want to see any tigers, elephants, or wild cats. Everything is possible. That's scary.

9. ***Lastly, I think there's something fun about finding snakes that are so good at hiding.*** Their camouflage is near perfect in some cases, and yet, because I'm just slightly

smarter, I can find them!

Finding snakes that are particularly hard to find, is a great challenge and one that I find interesting. It is especially hard to find some snakes. Some just require time and luck. Most snakes are like this. Some take time, luck, and a hell of a lot of skill in looking, in seeing.

Some of the hardest to find snakes are those that hide under leaves. In Thailand there are not many things to flip – like tin in the mid-west USA. We have plenty of leaves though. Snakes by the millions hide in the leaves and usually herpers are just not that diligent to start raking through all the leaves they find around them. I'm almost ready to do this, as there are some coral snakes and other species I'd like to find and many of them are under the leaf litter.

What do you think? Anything else that gets you excited about snakes?

Cheers,

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