

Basics of Snake Handling

Our topics for this week are:

- **Hazardous snakes to handle**
- **Routine handling captive-bred pet snakes**
- **Feeding time influence on handling snakes**

Pet snakes that have been raised in captivity and handled gently while young are usually easily handled with little restraint. Garter snakes, kingsnakes, hog-nosed snakes, and gopher snakes caught in the wild are sometimes kept as pets, but these are more intolerant of handling, susceptible to stress, and may have diseases and parasites they acquired in the wild.

Snakes kept as pet should not exceed 6½ feet in length. Constrictors more than 8 feet in length are so strong that they are considered inherently dangerous. Many escape or are released when they become a burden or bore to their owner resulting in endangerment to the snake's health and survival, indigenous wildlife, or unsuspecting humans.

Approaching and Catching

A handler should make sure the snake is aware of his presence and move at slightly slower than normal speed. Snakes bite in self defense or a feeding frenzy. Handlers need to make efforts not to threaten snakes nor to interfere with their feeding.

A tame snake is picked up by placing a hand toward the snake's side with outstretched fingers and slid under the first 1/3 of the snake's body. As it is picked up, the remainder of the body should be supported with the handler's other hand. The handler's fingers should be spread to provide wider support. The snake's head should not be reached for first nor the body held so tight that it cannot keep moving.

Young snakes, shedding snakes, and snakes expecting food tend to be more likely to bite. Arboreal snakes will try to progress up the handler's arm which, if permitted, can allow proximity to the handler's face and neck. This should not be allowed.

Handling for Routine Care and Management

Snakes are typically supported with their movement directed, not held in a manner to inhibit their movement. Holding them tightly stimulates the snake to attempt escape from a predator. This can also seriously damage their muscles and cause death days later. They should be given the illusion that they are free to escape when they want. As they are loosely held, a "rolling

hands” technique of holding them gives them the illusion that they are not trapped. They are allowed to move from one hand to the next then the hand they left becomes the next hand they move to. Immobilizing types of restraint should not typically be used. When holding a snake, it should never be held near the handler’s face.

The most likely time for a handler to be bitten is when reaching into the snake’s enclosure. The handler may startle them or because of the movement of his hand being perceived as food or containing food, especially if the handler has snake food odor on his hands. When reaching into an enclosure for an unfamiliar snake, the handler should block the snake’s head with one hand held flat with fingers together. The purpose is to create a barrier over the snake’s head while reaching for the body with the other hand. A flat hand is more difficult to bite.

Handling should not be attempted if food smell is on the handler’s hands or if the snake has recently eaten. Handling a snake soon after it has eaten, may cause the snake to regurgitate. This is common in ball pythons.

If a snake is possibly dangerous, a snake hook first should be used to lift the snake and then grasp their body. For those that are known to be dangerous, the head should be immobilized before picking the snake up. The basic hold for snake head restraint is to grasp the base of the skull between the thumb and middle finger with the index finger on top of the head. A snake pinning hook to pin the neck down on a soft surface may be needed to limit movement until the snake’s head can be grasped for manual control. The snake’s body should be restrained and supported after capturing the head to prevent thrashing and breaking its back. The snake’s head should be held firmly without squeezed. Approximately one handler is needed per 5 ft to control boids.

Snakes have musk glands near their cloaca that they may use to excrete a malodorous secretion which also is distasteful to their predators.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let’s recap the key points to remember from today’s episode:

- 1. Snakes being handled should never be allowed near the handler’s face.**
- 2. Snakes should not be handled with food-smell on a handler’s hands.**
- 3. Snakes that have recently eaten should not be handled due to risk of regurgitation.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 325 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.