

# Cool Facts - Snakes



There are 46 species and subspecies of snakes in Missouri; only five of them are venomous. The longest is the bullsnake, which averages five to six feet; the shortest is the flat-headed snake, which is about seven inches long. The most common are the Blue Racer, the Black Rat Snake and the Garter snake.

All snakes are carnivorous. In Missouri, they eat everything from insects and insect larvae to fish, frogs, birds, rodents, lizards and other snakes. Snakes must swallow their food whole. Their lower jaws are loosely joined to the skull and their upper jaws are moveable. As a result, some snakes can disarticulate their jaws and manage to eat animals three times the size of their heads.

Missouri's snake population includes species that are born alive as well as species



that hatch from eggs (like Black Rat Snakes). Eggs, which are generally laid shortly after the snakes emerge from hibernation, are elongated and have a tough, leathery shell. As a young snake develops within its egg, a small

"egg tooth" grows on the tip of its snout. The baby uses this "tooth" to slit the shell; after hatching, he sheds the tooth. Water snakes, garter snakes, copperheads, brown snakes, cottonmouths and rattlesnakes retain their young until they are completely developed. Each baby is protected inside a thin sac or membrane during its development. In general, both live-born snakes and hatched snakes are born in mid to late summer.



Snakes have two kinds of scales; small diamond shapes on the top and long rectangles, called "scutes", on the bottom side. Scutes help the snake move by

catching on stones, branches and other irregularities on the ground and propelling it along. A snake's backbone has from 200 to 400 vertebrae (depending on the species), so it's extremely flexible. A snake can move forward either with a side to side motion or in a straight line by literally walking on its ribs. Snakes have no eyelids; instead their eyes are covered by a clear, non-moveable scale which is shed when they shed their skin. Most snakes have an elongated right lung and either no left lung or a rudimentary one. Their long forked tongues constantly dart from their mouths, picking up odors and transferring them to a special organ (called the *Jacobson's organ*) in the roof of their mouths.

## Myth or Fact?

*A rattlesnake adds a rattle each year, so you can tell how old it is.*

**FALSE.** Rattlesnakes add a rattle each time they shed and they shed several times a year. Also, rattles break off fairly easily.



*Thousands of people die each year from snakebites.*

**FALSE.** Fewer than five people a year die from snakebite, though 120 die from bee stings and 150 die when struck by lightning.

*Snakes can climb trees and swim.*

**TRUE.** All snakes can swim, not just water snakes. Some snakes, like black rat snakes, are such good tree climbers that they prey on nesting birds.



*Some snakes 'play dead'.*

**TRUE.** Hog-nosed snakes have several defense mechanisms (running away, puffing up and hissing), but when all else fails, they roll over on their backs, stick out their tongues, defecate and play dead.

*Snakes can strike only from a coiled position.*

**FALSE.** Snakes can strike from any position. If you grab a snake, it can turn extremely quickly and bite your hand or arm.