

# KNOW YOUR NEIGHBORS

Good neighbors are hard to beat. They keep an eye on our houses when we're on vacation, help us with pet, plant, and child care, and may even become close friends.

Of course, neighbors aren't just of the human variety. Wildlife species—including snakes—are often part of the neighborhood as well.

Although snakes may not be the most welcome neighbors, they are a valuable part of a healthy ecosystem and many species act as controls for rodent populations.

While you might not invite your reptilian neighbors to the backyard cookout, it's important to know who they are. Learn to identify common species in your area so you know when to make friends and when to steer clear.

## Rattlesnakes

Of the 16 snake species in Wyoming, only two are venomous and pose a potential threat to humans, pets, and livestock.

The venomous **prairie rattlesnake** (*Crotalus viridis*) has a wide range in the state. Prairie rattlesnakes have a tan body with slightly darker brown blotches extending the length of their body; vertical pupils; a heat-sensing pit between their eyes and nostrils; and a brown eye mask bordered

by white. The rattle on their tail generates a characteristic buzzing sound when warning you that you are too close.

Their diet consists primarily of small mammals like ground squirrels, prairie dogs, and cottontail rabbits.

The **midget faded rattlesnake** (*Crotalus oreganus concolor*) has a restricted range within the lower Green River Valley area. Like other snakes, midget faded rattlesnakes prefer to be given space to escape when encountered.

If you find one on your property and giving it space is not an option, the Wyoming Game & Fish Department recommends contacting Game & Fish personnel to remove it rather than trying to dispatch it yourself. Most venomous snake bites in the U.S. occur when people harass or try to kill the snake, and venom from midget faded rattlesnakes contains potent, quick-acting neurotoxins.

## Harmless lookalikes

A few harmless snakes in Wyoming may, at first glance, resemble rattlesnakes. Both kinds of **gopher snake** in Wyoming, the bullsnake (*Pituophis catenifer sayi*) and the Great Basin gopher snake (*Pituophis catenifer deserticola*), have color patterns similar to rattlesnakes, with a yellow

(especially  
the reptilian  
kind)

base and darker brown to black splotches.

However, gopher snakes have round pupils and, unlike the prairie rattlesnake, do not have an eye mask or heat-sensing pit between their eyes and nostrils. They also lack a rattle on their tail, though they can produce a hissing noise that sounds very similar to a rattlesnake rattle!

Although they can imitate a rattlesnake fairly convincingly, these long snakes, which can reach up to seven feet in length, are non-venomous.

The bullsnake is found in the eastern and north-central parts of the state, and the Great Basin gopher snake occurs in the southwestern portion. They eat mice, pocket gophers, ground squirrels, prairie dogs, and rabbits.

The **plains hognose snake** (*Heterodon nasicus*) may also be mistaken for a rattlesnake. These small snakes rarely reach more



Photos by Mason Lee



1. Racer ; 2. Garter; 3. Bullsnake; 4. Rattlesnake; 5. Hognose

than three feet in length and are found throughout the eastern and central regions of the state. They have a light tan colored body with brown spots and an eye mask.

However, unlike rattlesnakes, they have round pupils, no rattles,

and no heat-sensing pit. Instead, they have an upturned snout (like a hog) which helps them burrow into the ground, where they feed primarily on toads and small rodents.

They are famous for playing dead, dramatically convulsing and rolling over to show their black bellies, sometimes completing the performance by musking and letting their tongue flop out of their mouths.



## Other non-threatening serpents

As their name suggests, **Eastern yellow-bellied racers** (*Coluber constrictor flaviventris*) are fast movers. Found throughout the eastern and central regions of Wyoming, these long, slender snakes are one of the few snake species in the state that are unpatterned as adults.

They have an olive grey-green back and a yellow underside. Young racers, however, look remarkably different and have a colored pattern similar to bullsnakes that helps camouflage them from predators. These diurnal snakes prey on rodents, birds, and reptiles, including other snakes.

**Gartersnakes** don't resemble rattlesnakes, but because they are usually found in habitats

near water, they are sometimes mistakenly identified as venomous water moccasins (also known as cottonmouths, water moccasins are only found in the southeastern United States).

All four kinds of gartersnake in Wyoming are harmless to people. These abundant snakes feed on small fish, frogs, slugs and snails, worms, and mice.

The wandering gartersnake (*Thamnophis elegans vagrans*) is the most widespread in the state. Wandering gartersnakes have a stripe running down their back that can be white, cream, or yellow in color. They have stripes on the side of their body that are similar in color to the stripe on their back. They typically have a checkered cream and black pattern between their stripes.

## Deterring unwanted neighbors

Despite the benefits snakes provide, even the harmless species aren't always given a friendly welcome to the neighborhood. If you want to discourage snakes from moving into your yard, the first and most important step is eliminating their habitat and food source.

Cool, damp spots such as piles of brush, leaves, and rocks (and other clutter) make attractive hiding places for both snakes and their prey. You can also help keep prey away by storing grains, bird seed, and pet food in tightly sealed containers, and by keeping grass mowed short where possible.

A sealed foundation under your home, garage, sheds, or barns also helps keep snakes from seeking shelter and denning under these buildings.

Snakes may appear on your property despite your mitigation efforts, but it is possible to safely coexist with them. Arm yourself with the knowledge to identify the different species of snakes found in your area. If you do encounter them, give snakes a wide berth to escape to safety.

Remember, snakes want nothing to do with people—just as most people want nothing to do with them.

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## NO TRESPASSING! Keeping out venomous visitors

If you live in an area with a dense population of rattlesnakes, snake-proof fencing around your yard or children's play area might bring you some peace of mind. The recommended mesh size is ¼ inch, which will keep even newborn rattlesnakes out. Fences should be 36 inches high. Make sure the area is tightly enclosed and there is no vegetation along the perimeter that rattlesnakes could use to climb over. Gates must also close tightly—any gaps could allow unwelcome rattlesnakes to find their way through.



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