



SLITHER SENSE

Mostly harmless and widely misunderstood, snakes quietly patrol the Bluebonnet region doing important work as both predator and prey. Here are seven species you're most likely to encounter — and what to know about them.

By Andrew Logan

Last summer, Mike Beech, a Central Texas wildlife control specialist, was called to a home in Bastrop after a family spotted an unfamiliar serpent in their backyard. By the time he arrived, nerves were frayed and the family's young children were waiting in the house.

Beech already had a good idea of what he'd find.

The homeowners sent him a photo, so Beech believed the long, sleek snake was a coachwhip, a nonvenomous species harmless to people. As he poked through the backyard garden, the snake bolted over his boot and zipped between the homeowner's legs. "He leaps about as high as the fence line," Beech said.

Beech dove forward, caught the coachwhip by the tail, and secured it barehanded. Crisis averted.

The children were released from the house, and Beech let them touch the snake. He explained that while healthy respect for these animals is important, the kids shouldn't grow up fearing them. Beech relocated the coachwhip far from the yard, where it could continue its quiet rodent-hunting life.

Snakes are stitched into the everyday fabric of the Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative service area — and the rest of Central Texas. They surface along barbed wire fences, tuck themselves beneath woodpiles and make the occasional appearance in manicured backyards. While some species pose a risk to pets and people, most are harmless, and all play an essential role in our local ecology.

Despite that, they are one of nature's most unfairly maligned neighbors. Learning how these important creatures live and behave can ease unnecessary fear and help people coexist with them more wisely.

More than 80 snake species live in Texas, and as many as 40 of them call Central Texas home. "Texas blows everybody out of the water when it comes to snake diversity," said Paul Crump, a herpetologist with the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department. The abundance comes from the state's diverse terrain and unique climate.

Bluebonnet's service area sits at an ecological crossroads, where the Edwards Plateau fades into the Blackland Prairie, and the East Texas woodlands meet the Post Oak Savannah, with drier country to the south. "That habitat diversity is what drives snake diversity," Crump said. In addition, Central Texas' mild winters and long warm seasons help: Snakes, being cold-blooded, aren't forced to exist underground as long as in colder regions. That makes human-snake interactions more likely.

Continued on Page 20



INSIDE

- Meet the species you're most likely to see, **Pages 18-19, 21**
- Do's and Don'ts, **Page 18**
- Snake bites 101, **Page 18**
- Helpful apps to ID snakes, **Page 19**
- How snakes cause power outages, **Page 19**

Drake Rangel, a Texas Parks & Wildlife biologist in Fayette County, holds Dottie, a 3-foot Great Plains rat snake.

Photo by Sarah Beal

DO'S AND DON'TS AROUND BLUEBONNET-AREA SNAKES

Do

- Give snakes space and leave them alone.
- Back away if you see one and give it room to escape.
- Wear tall boots and long pants in tall grass.
- Watch where you place your hands and feet.
- Supervise children outdoors.
- Teach children not to touch snakes.
- Keep yards and barns free of debris that attracts rodents.
- Keep dogs on a leash in areas where snakes might be present.
- Maintain control and awareness of where pets are exploring.

Don't

- Panic if you encounter a snake.
- Leave food sources that could attract prey animals.
- Put your bare feet or bare hands in areas you can't see.
- Try to handle a snake you can't identify.



BITTEN BY A SNAKE? HERE'S WHAT TO DO

Most snakebites do not happen because a snake is aggressive; they are the result of human interaction, such as stepping too close, reaching into a hidden space or attempting to kill a snake. While snakebites are uncommon, know what to do if one occurs:

- Stay calm and get to a hospital as soon as possible.
- Understand that the risk from snakebites is often overstated. Very few people die of snake bites in the United States.
- Don't cut the bite or try to suck out the venom.
- Don't apply a tourniquet or ice.
- Clean the bite with soap and water.
- If possible, note the description of the snake for medical personnel.

SNAKES YOU'RE LIKELY TO SEE

The Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative service area is home to dozens of snake species. Here are some of the most common.

Illustrations by Joe Stafford



WESTERN RAT SNAKE OR TEXAS RAT SNAKE

(Pantherophis obsoletus)

Venomous? No

Identification: One of the longest snakes in Texas, reaching 3½ to 6 feet; adults usually have dark gray or black blotches (juveniles are brown) on their backs that are irregularly shaped or hexagonal, and smaller blotches on their sides; they also have a white chin and throat.

Habitat: Forests, wooded river bottoms, rocky hillsides. Excellent climbers; often found around areas near humans: trees, chicken coops or barns.

Diet & ecological role: Eats rodents, birds, eggs and occasionally lizards or frogs. Major controller of rodent populations. Helps limit agricultural and structural pests. Prey for larger predators.

From the experts: "Often called chicken snakes since they are commonly found eating chicken eggs out of coops. They are adept climbers and mainly eat mice, rats or birds."

— *Toby Hibbitts, herpetologist and professor at Texas A&M University*



COACHWHIP

(Masticophis flagellum)

Venomous? No

Identification: This species generally reaches 4 to 5½ feet in length. It is considered one of the fastest snakes in the area, capable of speeds up to 4 mph; slender, light tan or yellowish brown in color; scales that look braided or woven; round eyes.

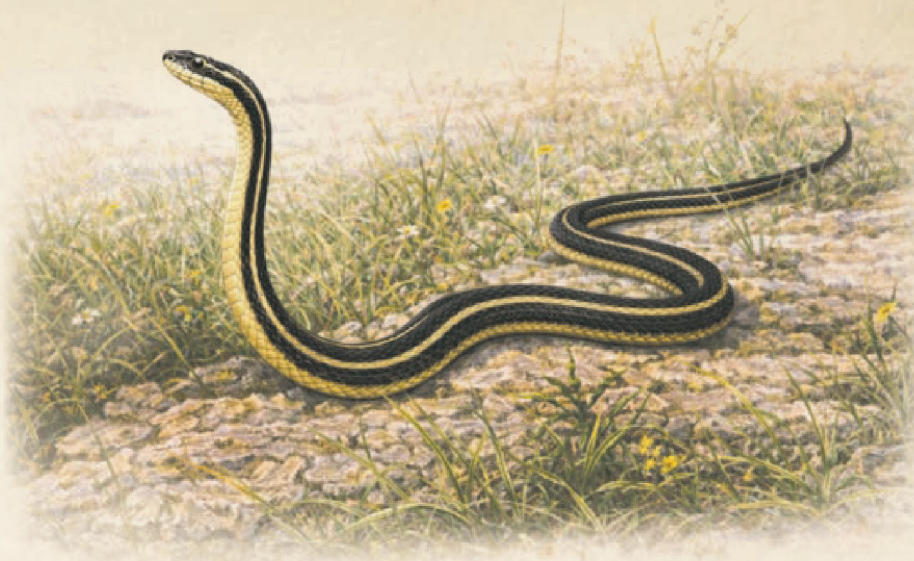
Habitat: Dry, open areas, including grasslands and rocky hillsides.

Diet & ecological role:

Eats rodents, other snakes, lizards, insects and eggs. Helps control populations of lizards, rodents and even other snakes, including venomous species.

From the experts: "Large, fast snakes that have great vision and search for their prey during the day." — *Toby Hibbitts*





WESTERN RIBBON SNAKE

(Thamnophis proximus)

Venomous? No

Identification: Typically 20 to 30 inches long with three bright yellow stripes against a dark brown or black background color, a yellow dot on the head and a long tail. Very fast and alert.

Habitat: Wide range of habitats, typically not far from water.

Diet & ecological role: Significant predator of amphibians, but also small fish and invertebrates. Helps connect aquatic and terrestrial food webs. Prey for larger predators.

From the experts: "These guys are super-fast and excellent swimmers. Interestingly enough, they give live birth!"

— Drake Rangel, Texas Parks & Wildlife Department biologist for Fayette County



BROAD-BANDED COPPERHEAD

(Agkistrodon laticinctus)

Venomous? Yes

Identification: Typically 20 to 30 inches long; light brown or tan with wide or hourglass-shaped bands. Copper-colored head. Vertical pupils and heat-sensing pits, located between the eye and nostril on each side.

Habitat: Woodlands, rocky slopes, forest edges, river bottoms.

Diet & ecological role: Eats rodents, lizards, frogs and large insects (especially juveniles). Controls small mammal and insect populations. Important prey for king snakes and birds of prey.

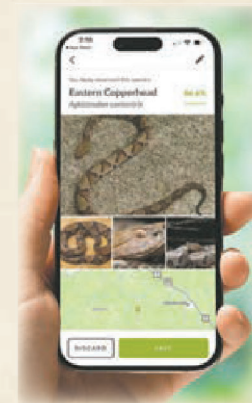
From the experts: "Regarding copperheads, I always love to point out the ways we've managed to use components of their venom for medicine to include treatments for ailments such as cancer, heart problems and blood conditions." — Drake Rangel

WHERE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT SNAKES

iNaturalist: Free mobile app and website that helps people identify plants and animals by sharing photos with a community of naturalists and scientists. — *Seek by iNaturalist: Uses image recognition to identify plants and animals instantly. No account required, safe for children.*

SnakeSnap! Subscription-based mobile app designed to identify snakes from photos and provide safety information. Some versions of the app use AI to identify snakes automatically, while others rely on a panel of human experts who review submissions and send back an identification.

Facebook groups: Central Texas Snake ID, Texas Snake Identification.



By uploading a photo to the iNaturalist app, users can quickly identify snakes and learn whether a species is venomous or harmless.



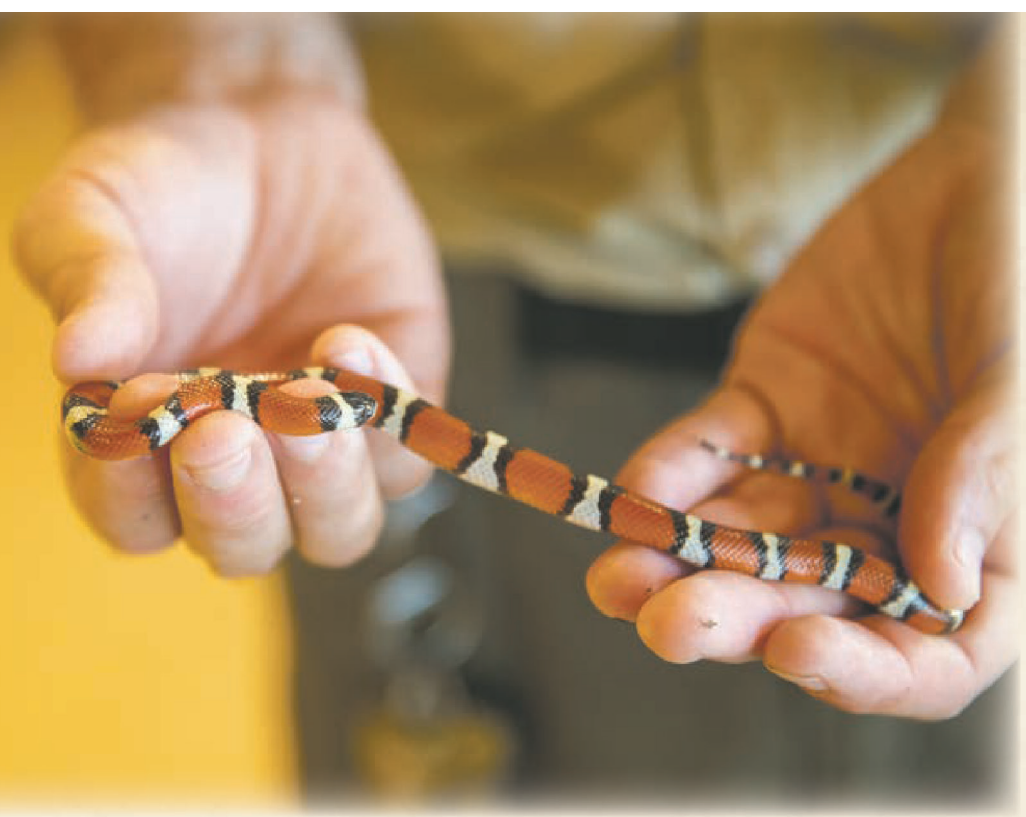
WHEN SNAKES CAUSE POWER OUTAGES

Snakes are part of the Central Texas landscape — and on occasion, their curiosity can bring them close to electrical infrastructure. Because snakes are natural climbers, they can enter substations or electrical equipment and come into contact with energized equipment, which can cause a short circuit and trigger a power outage.

Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative designs its system with wildlife in mind. Substations are equipped with snake-resistant fencing and other barriers to keep animals out. Crews also perform frequent inspections and continuous monitoring to identify potential problems early and help prevent snake-related outages before they occur.

The milk snake is a nonvenomous species, often mistaken for a coral snake, that lives in a variety of habitats, including woods, rocky areas and sometimes barns, where they help control rodent populations.

Photo courtesy of Maegan Lanham, Texas Parks & Wildlife Department



Continued from Page 17

In the Bluebonnet region, snakes occupy one of the ecosystem's most consequential — and least appreciated — jobs, functioning as both hunters and hunted in a natural system that depends on balance. As predators, they quietly keep populations in check, consuming everything from rodents and insects to amphibians. They are uniquely suited for the task. With their slender and flexible physique, snakes can slip into narrow cracks and other tight spaces that other hunters can't follow. Rat snakes have adapted seamlessly to rural life. Drawn to agricultural buildings where rodents feast on animal feed, rat snakes, typically 3½ to 6 feet long, are known to provide a kind of pest control that predates barn cats.

Snakes are also an essential food source. Hawks and owls snatch them from above, while coyotes, bobcats and skunks hunt them on the ground. That two-way exchange keeps the web of life in balance. "If you remove any given piece of the puzzle that keeps [prey species] populations in check, their population is allowed to grow past what the carrying capacity of the landscape could be," said Drake Rangel, a wildlife biologist for Fayette County with the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department. That can lead to habitat degradation and the spread of disease, he said.

Let's face it: We can sing their ecological praises, but snakes usually conjure bad feelings among people. "When we're talking about snakes, the first that come to mind for most people are the venomous ones," Rangel said.

That fear far exceeds the risk, especially in Central Texas, where most snake species are nonvenomous.

Even the venomous ones aren't looking for trouble. One of the biggest misconceptions about snakes is that they are aggressive, experts say, but they strike only when they feel threatened. "Snakes are as afraid of you as you are of them," said Toby Hibbitts, a herpetologist and professor at Texas A&M University. "If you give them space and leave them alone, they're going to go on their way. They're not going to chase you."

For Donald Miller, a Bluebonnet member living on 20 wooded acres in Burton in Washington County, that understanding took time. At first, the snakes he saw unsettled him. If he crossed paths with a rattlesnake, he killed it. Over the years, however, his attitude softened, especially as he became more accustomed to seeing snakes on his land. "We used to see coachwhips mating right outside our window," he said. "That's how common they were."

Miller, 80, describes snakes as "beautiful, endlessly fascinating to observe, and critical to a healthy environment." His shift in perspective is one that biologists say often comes after spending time observing how the land and wildlife are woven together. "I wouldn't kill any snake now," Miller said. "This old adage about the only good snake is a dead snake is just wrong."

You don't have to be a backyard herpetologist to live safely alongside snakes, but learning about the few venomous species native to the area can help reduce danger. Out of all the snake species here, "really only four, maybe five are actually venomous," Rangel said. People have long leaned on visual characteristics to identify threatening snakes: triangular heads, slit pupils and skin patterns. Many of those cues can be helpful,

but none are foolproof. Even the distinctive color pattern of coral snakes can be misleading when genetics produce rare mutations. "With nature, there're just always exceptions," Rangel said.

The technology in your pocket can help close the gap between fear and understanding. Rangel regularly points to the app iNaturalist, which lets users photograph a snake and get identification help from a network of professionals and experienced amateurs. "It's a really good way to learn what's around you," he said, noting that he uses it when something stumps him.

Even when venomous snakes are present, their danger is often overstated. About 7,000 to 8,000 people are bitten by venomous snakes in the United States each year, and roughly five die, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Serious injuries can occur, but the odds of being bitten are low. "You're more likely to be bitten by 20 different dogs than you are to be bitten by one snake," Crump said.

Experts agree that if you find a snake on your property, the best response is often to leave it alone and give it time to move on. If you're unsure of the species, step back and keep your distance. If you can, take a photo and contact a local pest control professional. Above all, don't escalate the situation by trying to scare it away.

Lately, Miller has seen fewer snakes on his property than in past years. A herpetologist told him it's likely just the natural ebb and flow of wildlife. Miller hopes that's true. He does know this: Fear shrinks with familiarity, respect grows with understanding and wonder can expand your appreciation. "The more awe you have for nature," he said, "the happier you'll be."



WESTERN DIAMONDBACK RATTLESNAKE

(*Crotalus atrox*)

Venomous? Yes
Identification: Averages 3 ½ to 4 ½ feet long, can reach 7 feet; two parallel pale stripes separated by a darker stripe extending diagonally across the cheeks to the eye; brown diamond-shaped markings down the center of its back; tails have alternating black-and-white bands and can rattle more than 60 times per second as a defensive display.
Habitat: Flatlands, prairies, rocky hills and low mountains.
Diet & ecological role: Eats rodents, rabbits and birds. Important prey for coyotes, foxes, bobcats, hawks and Texas Indigo snakes.
From the experts: “Out of all the venomous snakes around, I consider rattlesnakes to be the most polite. They are one of a few snakes with an audible sound letting you know that they are there.” — *Drake Rangel*



PLAIN-BELLIED WATERSNAKE

(*Nerodia erythrogaster*)

Venomous? No
Identification: Typically, 30 to 48 inches long; mostly brown to black with blotches, plain off-white, yellow or orange belly. Adults are often dark with faint or no pattern. Defensive when handled (flattening head and musking — the release of a strong-smelling fluid).
Habitat: Lakes, ponds, rivers, swamps, marshes.
Diet & ecological role: Eats fish, frogs, tadpoles, crayfish, invertebrates, carrion. Helps control fish and amphibian populations. Important prey for birds and mammals.
From the experts: “They are completely harmless to humans, but if harassed they will not only bite but also musk similar to a skunk! These guys are often mistaken for venomous cottonmouths almost purely due to their association with water. If you really look at them, short of being a dark-colored snake in water, they’re pretty different!” — *Drake Rangel*



BROWN SNAKE

(*Storeria dekayi*)



Venomous? No
Identification: Usually 9 to 13 inches long; graying brown to dark brown coloring with a lighter band extending down the middle of the back; band’s outer edges are usually lined with a row of evenly spaced small dark spots.
Habitat: Prefers wet, shaded places that offer ground cover, such as river and creek floodplains and their slopes, swamps, freshwater marshes, damp woods and even water-filled ditches.
Diet & ecological role: Eats earthworms, snails and slugs. Prey to birds, larger snakes, frogs, toads, weasels and domestic cats.
From the experts: “These snakes eat small invertebrates and are often found in leaf litter.”
— *Toby Hibbitts*

Bluebonnet to compete at 30th Texas Lineman's Rodeo

BLUEBONNET ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE is sending a senior journeyman lineworker team, three journeyman lineworker teams, 12 apprentice lineworkers, 12 competition judges and a barbecue team to the Texas Lineman's Rodeo at Nolte Island Park near Seguin on July 18.

The rodeo tests the skills that lineworkers rely on daily, from climbing poles to repairing equipment. Other challenges include a dexterous pole climb while carrying a raw egg without breaking it and a pole-top rescue of a life-sized mannequin, simulating the rescue of an injured coworker. Judges evaluate speed, technique and adherence to safety standards, highlighting the precision and preparation required in real-world linework.

Beyond the competition, the rodeo celebrates the electric utility community. Bluebonnet teams, joined by family and friends, will cheer on their peers.

The public is invited to watch the events along the Guadalupe River and see firsthand the skill and dedication of lineworkers. Learn more at ttra.org, and get live event updates on Bluebonnet's social media.



Logan Lancaster from Giddings climbs a utility pole, aiming to go up and down as quickly as possible without breaking an egg held in a bag in his mouth in the 2025 Texas Lineman's Rodeo.



Journeymen Ty Duesterheft and John Zamora from Maxwell change out power line equipment during the 2025 Texas Lineman's Rodeo.



Kyle Kasper of Giddings pulls rope up to his team as they work to change out power line equipment on top of a pole at the 2025 Texas Lineman's Rodeo. Journeymen lineworkers compete in teams. — Photos by Sarah Beal

OFFICE CLOSINGS

Bluebonnet offices will be closed Friday, June 19, for Juneteenth. If your power goes out, you can report it by texting OUT to 44141, online at bluebonnet.coop, on the MyBluebonnet mobile app or by calling 800-949-4414. You can pay your bills anytime online, on the mobile app or by calling 800-842-7708 (select option 2 when prompted).

Are you ready for hurricane season?

Atlantic storm season runs June 1–Nov. 30.

For more resources, visit bluebonnet.coop/hurricanes.

Prepare and stay informed

Report outages fast and track power restoration in real time

REPORT OUTAGES

Text OUT to 44141 • Use the MyBluebonnet mobile app
Online at bluebonnet.coop • Call 800-949-4414

OUTAGE MAP

See reported and confirmed outages or report an outage at bluebonnet.coop/outages

UPDATE YOUR CONTACT INFO

Log in to your MyBluebonnet account to update your phone number
so Bluebonnet can reach you during an outage

YOU
got
THIS

Learn more at bluebonnet.coop/yougotthis



Scan the QR code
to get started.

