Eye to eye with snakes

Eastern hog-nosed snake.

by Walter E. Kilroy

Kilroy is vice president of the Massachusetts SPCA in Boston.

Most animal control/shelter personnel become involved with snakes in response to citizen calls -- a terrified resident wants a snake removed from the yard or a snake is presented to the shelter as a stray or unwanted "pet."

If the caller's description positively indicates that the snake is an indigenous and non-poisonous species, the caller should be assured that non-poisonous snakes found in the U.S. are, for all practical purposes, harmless. In the unlikely event of a snake bite, the damage would in most instances be less serious than a cat scratch.

For the person willing to listen, I consider it appropriate to mention that snakes present little nuisance value. They don't bark, chase cars or bicycles, tip over trash, burn shrubs, dig up or raid gardens. In fact, non-poisonous snakes should be among the more welcome of our wildlife visitors, since they feed on animals commonly considered to be pests.

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Here are some suggestions to offer to persons who want to keep snakes away:
1. Keep grass cut short. Snakes are essentially secretive by nature, and tall grass offers them a sense of security.
2. Eliminate piles of rocks and other debris, since they offer snakes a home and a source of mice and insects.
3. Flush the crevices in the fieldstone foundations of older homes with water, and when the snakes have departed, fill the openings with mortar.
4. Treat with moth crystals those areas that are particularly attractive to snakes. A snake’s most highly developed sense is that of smell. It relies on constant flicking of the tongue to pick up particles of odor, and the moth crystals are particularly offensive.

The single most important rule of snake identification is that there exists no “rule of thumb.” There are both indigenous and exotic species which may appear to the uninformed to be poisonous but are harmless — and vice versa.

One often hears that the shape of a snake’s head can be used to determine whether it is poisonous; cylindrical indicating non-poisonous, triangular indicating poisonous. However, you have a 50% chance of being wrong with this “rule.”

Another misconception is that the shape of a snake’s eye pupil is an indicator — elliptical indicating poisonous, round indicating non-poisonous. But both eye shapes are found in each group.

When dealing with a snake whose identification has not been ascertained, approach and treat it as poisonous. This means with humane sensitivity, respect and caution.

Bear in mind that a snake can generally strike over a distance equal to 2/3 the length of its body. When you look down on a snake, it looks farther away from your feet and legs than it is.

Unnecessary handling of a potentially dangerous snake is always foolish. The most practical and efficient approach is to sweep it with a broom or other implement into a plastic garbage can or other container which can be securely closed.

If handling is unavoidable, pin the head gently but firmly with a forked implement. If possible, avoid exerting unnecessarily harsh force on the snake's head. Such force often causes a violent thrashing reaction.

Grasp immediately behind the head, and restrain and support as much of the snake's body as possible to minimize thrashing and potential injury. When capturing a non-poisonous but frightened and aggressive snake, cover it with a blanket or jacket, give it time to settle down, peel the material back until the neck is exposed and grasped as described above.

A warning — should you be called upon to pick up or receive one of the so-called pit vipers (rattlesnakes, copperheads, or moccasins, etc.) contained in a bag, be mindful of their ability to sense body heat and strike through the bag at the source.

When handling large constrictors such as boa constrictors and pythons, use only that amount of forcible restraint that the animal’s temperament and behavior warrant. Unnecessarily harsh grasping and rigid restraint can quickly result in making an otherwise manageable snake unmanageable.

For additional help on snake handling, contact the nearest zoo, museum of natural history or herpetological society.

(Another resource is the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists, National Marine Fisheries Service, National Museum of Natural History, Washington, D.C. 20560. In a future issue of SHELTER SENSE, Kilroy will discuss care and feeding of captured snakes.)
Animal regulations are explained in non-legal language in a pamphlet mailed to 40,000 area residents by the Lima-Allen County (Ohio) Humane Society.

Titled "Your Pets and the Law," the pamphlet explains in simple terms the dog licensing and "leash laws," pointing out that these laws protect animals from traffic and other hazards as well as protecting the property of other citizens. The society has a contract for animal control in the county. There is also a paragraph on general pet care, a warning against approaching wild animals and a listing of the services the society offers. The back page solicits donations.

The mailing labels were produced by a local company that prints the Lima and Allen County telephone directories. Society executive director W.F. Bill Reeder reports that the pamphlet has been well received by the community. (Lima-Allen Co. Humane Society, 1623 Reservoir Rd., Lima, Ohio 45804.)

The Lubbock (Texas) Humane Society distributes a pamphlet to explain the pet overpopulation problem and what the individual can do to help. The title is "The Pet Crisis in the Lubbock Area," which gets the attention of people who don't realize that there is a crisis.

The pamphlet stresses the cost to taxpayers of handling and destroying surplus animals, appealing to non-pet owners as well as owners. In a section on lost pets, phone numbers of the local radio stations that announce lost and found pets are listed. (Lubbock Humane Society, P.O. Box 2192, Lubbock, Texas 79408.)

Elkhart, Ind., has a new ordinance prohibiting exotic animal pets. The Elkhart County Humane Society has worked for passage of the ordinance, which states that exotic and wild animals "however well-trained, declawed, defanged, ostensibly domesticated, and affectionate to people are nevertheless potentially dangerous."

Fines are $50-$500 for a first offense, and law officers can take possession of wild animals until the owner makes arrangements for their removal. A cougar purchased as a pet in Elkhart had to be euthanized because of behavioral problems. (Elkhart Co. Humane Society, P.O. Box 123, Elkhart, Ind. 46514)

In Franklin County, Va., a circuit court judge had ordered the dog warden to stop the practice of shooting dogs that remain impounded after five days, according to the Alleghany Humane Society, Inc.

The judge told county officials to use drug injection for euthanasia under a veterinarian's supervision. The ruling was the result of a suit brought by concerned citizens, and the efforts of Walt Lane, vice president of the Virginia Federation of Humane Societies, Inc.

A program in Virginia is helping humane investigators and encouraging cooperation between humane groups and the state veterinarian's office.

The Virginia Federation of Humane Societies, Inc. and the Virginia State Veterinarian's Office have developed a home-study course for humane investigators, which covers the areas of animal control and welfare laws, investigation procedures, euthanasia and general animal care.

Home study allows volunteer investigators with limited funds to participate and allows the trainees to set their own schedules.

Animals picked up by humane officers in Ann Arbor, Mich., are housed at the Humane Society of Huron Valley shelter. Persons who find their lost pets at the shelter but refuse to claim them because of the fees involved are prohibited from owning a pet for one year. (The impounding fee is $10, board is $4 per day and the ticket fine is $15.)

When owners come to look for lost pets, they must show identification and are let into the kennel area by a buzzer security system. If an owner refuses to pay to reclaim the pet, his or her name and address are turned over to the Ann Arbor police humane officers. The officers look for signs of pets when they are in the neighborhoods of those on the list, and can confiscate pets when they violate the one-year period. (Humane Society of Huron Valley, 3100 Cherry Hill Rd., Ann Arbor, Mich. 48105)

Chicago dog walkers must carry and use some device to clean up pet excrement or be fined $25, according to a Chicago Tribune report. Plastic disposal bags are being made available at city parks, but a newspaper or handkerchief will also fulfill the requirement.

Police and animal control officers have enforcement powers and are strictly enforcing the ordinance to make citizens aware of it early.

Sentry dogs in Los Angeles are now under the control of the City Department of Animal Regulation. A new ordinance sets up an Examining Committee to screen and license sentry dog trainers and develop a system for licensing each sentry dog working in Los Angeles.

The committee is made up of experienced trainers and an animal welfare representative. The ordinance is intended to protect the public from buying or renting improperly trained guard dogs. It will also prevent such inhumane training practices as snapping rags in dogs' faces, putting electric shock collars on them, and feeding them gun powder (which supposedly makes them mean). (Los Angeles Department of Animal Regulation, 111 East First St., Los Angeles, Calif. 90012)
Kathie Flood, former director of the Humane Society of the United States, now serves on the board of directors of the Tompkins Co. (N. Y.) SPCA. This article originally appeared in their newsletter, Tailbearer.

The course is four lessons, each including a reading assignment and worksheets to be completed and returned to the state office to be graded. There is a final exam, and those successfully completing the course are listed as Approved Humane Investigators for Virginia. Trainees pay only $1.50 for a booklet on Virginia animal regulations.

If you are interested in initiating such a program for your state (or if you are a humane investigator in Virginia and would like to take the course), contact W. O. Crutchfield, V. M. D., Department of Agriculture and Commerce, P. O. Box 4191, Lynchburg, Va. 24502, for more information.

Five humane societies and one animal control agency have been accredited, and the program is expanding with a new staff member. Kathie Flood, former director of the Humane Society of Huron Valley (Mich.), an accredited society, has joined HSUS as a field agent for accreditation evaluation.

To be accredited, societies and agencies must provide humane care and handling of animals in the shelter and in the field, neuter all animals adopted and have active humane education and cruelty investigation programs. For the complete requirements, write HSUS Accreditation, 2100 L St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037.

A short pamphlet, "The Advantages of Neutering Pets," is available from Veterinary Medical Association of Tennessee, 200 Woodruff St., Suite 104, Nashville, Tenn. 37215.

The case for neutering
by Susan MacKenzie, VMD

The decrease in the desire to roam becomes important for dog owners as more towns pass leash laws, and during hunting season, when special curfews may be imposed and a dog may be shot if seen running loose. Unaltered male cats make poor housepets. Male cat urine has a potent odor and adult male cats often develop the habit of "spraying" the walls with urine if kept inside. These cats also possess a strong instinct to roam and therefore do not adapt well to confinement.

Besides decreasing the likelihood of fight wounds, neutering can prevent other medical problems such as infections and tumors of the testicles. Many older male dogs develop enlarged prostates. This causes discomfort when defecating and a predisposition to prostate infections, cysts, and abscesses. By removing the main hormonal influence on the prostate, castration greatly reduces the risk of these problems.

Other methods of controlling pet population are being developed, but none has yet been proven as safe or as effective as surgical neutering, and none provides the additional behavioral and medical benefits. For these reasons, surgical neutering remains the most practical method available today.

The sad truth is that people do collect animals to sell to research laboratories. Peninsula Humane Society (Burlingame, Calif.) has issued a press release warning those individuals who try to find homes for animals to be alert to this practice.

PHS advises that potential adoptors should be asked for identification and business and personal references, and that these should be checked before turning over the animal. If someone claims that an animal is their lost pet, the individual who found the animal should demand positive identification (say, a family photo with the animal) and should note the animal's behavior toward the person claiming it. If there is doubt about ownership, PHS says, don't surrender the animal.

PHS's public service message was carried by area newspapers.
Are you preventing heartworm?

Animal shelters can take steps to prevent canine heartworm, advises the Gaines Dog Research Center. Since more than 60 species of mosquitoes are known to be carriers of heartworm, shelters should prevent accumulation of stagnant water to control mosquito breeding. Empty rain water buckets and sweep away puddles immediately after a rain. Nearby wooded areas should be checked for standing water, and discarded cans that are collecting water should be picked up. Ground should be leveled and drainage ditches dug where possible. Shelters can also consider setting up bird "apartment houses." Purple martins (black swallows that capture insects in the air) are especially helpful, but all birds will help control insect overpopulation.

ASPCA Bulletin reports that heartworm is found in every state with heavier infestation in the eastern half of the country (from material prepared by E.R. Squibb & Sons, Inc.). Shelters should test all animals before release, to avoid letting infected animals into the community, as they can be carriers. Animals should always be tested for heartworms before being treated. Treatment can be very hard on the animal and can cause death if not administered properly and under the direction of a veterinarian.

Materials

An assortment of materials under the title "Pethood or Parenthood" is available at cost from the American Veterinary Medical Association. The materials discuss the disadvantages of leaving pets fertile and the advantages of sterilization, including better pet health and behavior.

The materials include:

- 6-panel color pamphlet ..... 3¢ each
- 5-minute 16 mm film, color and sound ..... free loan or purchase ($36)
- 7-minute slide presentation with sound cassette ..... $21 (slide presentation also available as a filmstrip with cassette or 33 1/3 rpm record; audio track can be used with self-operating or standard projectors)
- 30-second public service television announcement ..... free to any group that will request local air time.

AVMA offers inexpensive pamphlets on canine distemper, heartworm, parasites and rabies, and tips on traveling with pets. A list of institutions that offer animal technology programs is also available.

For complete information, contact AVMA at 930 N. Meacham Rd., Schaumburg, Ill. 60196 -- (312) 885-8070.
The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) has produced two television spots for local humane organizations. One is an appeal for funds featuring actress Amanda Blake -- the other discusses pet overpopulation and encourages pet sterilization. Your local group need only have the television station add a "trailer" with your name and address.

The spots are $35 each, and can be ordered from HSUS, 2100 L St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037.

The texts of the two spots are as follows:

**Overpopulation**
You call it putting an animal to sleep. We call it euthanasia. And we don't like it anymore than you do. According to The Humane Society of the United States, more than 13 million unwanted animals are being put to death each year. And the problem's getting worse. Killing animals is not the answer. More shelters are not the answer. The solution is up to you. You've got to be a more responsible pet owner. Won't you please help us and the animals? Have your pet spayed or neutered. Keep it at home where it belongs. Help us stop this needless waste of life. We really don't want to do this anymore.

**AMANDA BLAKE**
Hello. I'm Amanda Blake. Today, I'm not playing the role of Miss Kitty. Today, I'm speaking to you as a Director of The Humane Society of the United States. This is my dog Sato. He's been a member of my family for some time. Lots of dogs and cats aren't so lucky. Animal welfare groups all across this country have become the foster families for unwanted, homeless, and mistreated animals. They're housing, feeding, and caring for unwanted animals. They're finding families for homeless animals. And, they're investigating and preventing cruelty to animals. When kindness becomes a way of life, they can close their doors. They'd really like to go out of business. Until then, you can help by supporting their efforts. Help your animal welfare group go out of business. For us—and for the animals.

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**Your Dog Should be a School Dropout!**
As teachers and parents are encouraging young people to stay in school and have regular attendance, there is another participant in the school program that is being encouraged to stay out of school—this is your dog!

Dogs like to go to school. Some parents and children think it is funny that the dog likes to go and they do not discourage it. However, there are many instances when it ceases to be amusing, and instead there is tragedy.

- Dogs become involved in school play... somebody gets hurt.
- Dogs steal lunches... somebody goes hungry.
- Dogs knock children from bicycles... somebody else gets hurt... sometimes somebody gets killed... sometimes it is the dog...
- Dogs get lost... somebody gets worried.
- Dogs get injured... somebody pays a veterinary bill.
- Some people dislike dogs and the mess they make... dogs get poisoned... sometimes they get shot... many get stoned.
- Dogs bite... someone is treated for the bite wounds... somebody takes injections because of the fear of rabies.

**SCHOOL IS BAD FOR DOGS—DOGS ARE BAD FOR SCHOOLS**
**DOGS AT LARGE CREATE DANGEROUS SITUATIONS FOR YOUR DOG AND HUMANS**
**KEEP YOUR DOG AT HOME—ALIVE AND SAFE**

This space for your organization’s name and address

The message above can be clipped out and reproduced in quantity by your local printer, for you to distribute at schools, shopping centers, libraries and other community locations. Remember to add your organization’s name, address, and telephone number in the space by typing, typesetting or affixing your group letterhead. You can also purchase advertising space in your local newspapers for the reproducible or use it in your organization’s newsletter or magazine.
Television and radio stations are required to provide a certain amount of air time for public service announcements. Humane societies around the country have taken advantage of this requirement to air messages about the availability of pets for adoption, responsible pet ownership and other topics.

However, many city and county animal control agencies are not using this medium as they could be.

A 1973 survey of mayors and city councilmen named "dog and other pet control problems" as the most frequent topic of citizen complaints. Clearly an animal control department is a public service to citizens and should definitely use public service air time to reach the community.

One approach is to make public service announcements on a regular basis - say, once a week - on one of your department's achievements. If you have returned a beloved pet to an anxious owner or one of your officers saved a child from an animal bite, you have a good human interest story to take to the public.

You can also produce information announcements about how pet owners can obtain or renew licenses, reducing the number of telephone inquiries you will need to answer.

If your agency has a program for free vaccinations or if you make licenses available at shopping centers or other community locations, use public service air time to let pet owners know how your agency is serving them.

These are just a few suggestions as to how the animal control agency can reach out into the community and become more effective in the process. Other information channels include having ACOs distribute inexpensive flyers, or sending them into schools or to community club meetings to discuss animal problems.

If you take a fresh look at your community with the idea of gaining better communication, you can shed the image of "dog-catcher" and gain greater public cooperation.