



BROWNSNAKE (*STORERIA DEKAYI*) OBSERVATION GUIDE FOR HERPSCAPERS

by John Byrd

INTRODUCTION:

There are five subspecies of these shy little snakes found throughout the Southeast. Here the focus is on the Midland brownsnake which has the broadest distribution and whose behavior is similar to the other subspecies. They live in a variety of habitats ranging from woodlands to suburban backyards. Unfortunately they are often needlessly killed by homeowners who neglect to learn about suburban wildlife. Two common reasons given for killing brownsnakes are: 1) "I thought it was a copperhead," and 2) "I was unsure of what kind it was and did not want to take a chance on it being poisonous." Some of the same people that kill harmless snakes may know the names of dozens of different plants, insects, birds, etc. With our ability to describe and recognize a huge number of species, there is little excuse for such unwarranted acts. It is always time well spent to learn a little about the biological diversity in one's own backyard. Folks who enjoy discovering snakes can attract them by placing some boards or pieces of tin around the edges of vegetated areas of their property. A variety of snakes use these cover objects for protection, to warm up, and to find food. (See the SEPARC Habitat Guides for other strategies to attract snakes).

IDENTIFICATION:

Adult brownsnakes are 10 to 15 inches long and vary in color from gray, brown, to reddish brown. They usually have two rows of dark markings down each side of the back. Typically some of the markings are connected by lines across the back. You may also notice larger spots on the back of the head and neck which often join each other to form a collar or dark patch as shown in the photo above. They have an unmarked belly with small black dots along the edges.

BEHAVIOR:

Finding a brownsnake provides a great opportunity to learn how some snakes respond to disturbance or perceived danger. Does the snake "freeze" (remain very still) or try to flee when it is exposed? If you handle

one of these gentle snakes it may behave in one or more of the following ways: 1) release a smelly musk, 2) hide its head under the coils of its body or play dead, or 3) flatten its body to appear larger. Snakes are not alone when it comes to trying to look bigger when threatened. This strategy is commonly observed in animals ranging from toads to people. Just think about how two humans try to intimidate each other by standing tall and pushing out their chest when facing off. Animal behaviors that discourage or intimidate opponents, thus resolving a stressful encounter without an actual physical struggle, save energy and prevent injury or death. Brownsnakes may be observed entering garages or out buildings in late fall when temperatures are dropping. They are likely seeking warmer conditions while looking for insects and spiders to feed on. As shown in the photo, feeding on spiders may have unexpected consequences – look closely and you will notice a dead brownsnake caught in a spider web hanging from the bottom of the chair.



Brownsnakes feed on a variety of invertebrates including worms, slugs, insects and spiders. The one shown here (arrow) was found dead hanging in a spider web. In nature it is not always clear as to where you stand – your prey may actually be your predator!

LEARNING MORE:

The books listed below have a wealth of natural history information on snakes and are complimented with outstanding photographs. Unfortunately, many websites on snakes tend to take a sensationalism approach. Look for an online reptile atlas for your state or use one of the sites below.

Books:

- 1) Snakes of the Eastern United States, (2017) by Whit gibbons. This book has fun information at the end of each species account on how the snake got its name. It also contains supplemental reading on introduced snake species in the Southeast and an interesting section on people and snakes.
- 2) The Reptiles of Tennessee, (2013) edited by Matthew L. Niemiller, R. Graham Reynolds, and Brian T. Miller. An extra bonus in this book is the delightful “Field Notes” of the author’s field trip excursions.
- 3) Amphibians and Reptiles of Georgia, (2008) edited by John B. Jensen, Carlos D. Camp, Whit gibbons, and Matt J. Elliott. This comprehensive work has an excellent overview on amphibian and reptile conservation and a thorough reference section for further study.
- 4) Snakes In Question – The Smithsonian Answer Book, (1996) by Carl H. Ernst and George R. Zug. A must have book for kids and adults alike. It covers a wide range of topics including a section on “Folk Tales.”

Websites:

- 1) <http://srelherp.uga.edu/herps.htm> – This site takes you to the Savanna River Ecology Lab. Here you will find outstanding photos and information on most of the snakes found in the Southeast.
- 2) <http://www.apsubiology.org/tnreptileatlas/> - Covers the snakes of Tennessee
- 3) http://www.virginiaherpetologicalsociety.com/reptiles/snakes/snakes_of_virginia.htm - Covers the snakes of Virginia.
- 4) <https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/herpetology/fl-snakes/list/> - Covers the snakes of Florida.