People react to snakes in different ways. Some fear them, whilst others are fascinated and respectful of them. Generations of tales, conditioning and rumour have portrayed snakes as aggressive, dangerous creatures. Whilst all snakes in the ACT are venomous (except the blind snake), they are shy, non-aggressive creatures that will quickly retreat if not provoked. However, five of the ACT’s snakes are regarded as potentially dangerous to humans.

Why do snakes enter gardens?
Sometimes snakes will enter suburban gardens in search of water - in pet bowls, fish ponds and swimming pools - particularly during long, dry periods and also in search of food (e.g. mice feeding from aviaries).

In the ACT, snakes are most active from October to March when they sun themselves or when they move in search of food.

Snakes in the web of life
Snakes are important in the food chain, consuming smaller animals, some of which are introduced pests such as mice. Snakes in turn provide food for other animals like birds and reptiles.

Snakes by law
Snakes are protected by law (Nature Conservation Act 1980) in all states and territories of Australia and may not be killed unless they threaten life. Offences under the Act carry severe penalties. Snakes cannot be:
- taken from the wild;
- kept without a licence; or
- traded without a licence.

Snake species in the ACT
Eight species are known to inhabit the ACT. The Eastern Brown Snake is the most frequently seen in suburban gardens. The Red-Bellied Black Snake, the Tiger Snake and the Black-headed Snake are seen only occasionally.

In the ACT, the Eastern Brown Snake varies from brown to grey and can even be blackish, dark brown or orange. Young snakes may be entirely brown or may have a black patch on their head and a black band on their neck. Black bands across the body may or may not be present.

Snakes in your house or yard
In most cases the snake is just passing through on its way to or from food, water, shelter or a sunny spot. Move pets and children inside for an hour or until the snake moves off. To reduce the chance of it staying, and in preparation for times when snakes are most active (i.e. spring and summer):
- keep lawns and gardens well maintained;
- remove piles of wood or other debris from the yard or store it off the ground;
- ensure pet food and water bowls are not accessible to wildlife;
Avoid being bitten

Snakes are naturally shy and their first form of defence is to move away from danger. Humans are seen as danger. However, if provoked or cornered, a snake may attempt to protect itself by striking. People are most likely to be bitten when attempting to kill or handle a snake. Although snakes move at the speed of a fast walk, they can strike very rapidly if aroused. To avoid being bitten:

- move away and let the snake go on its way;
- never try to kill or handle a snake;
- be alert at all times in the bush, especially in the early morning when snakes are more likely to be sunning themselves;
- cover up with trousers and enclosed shoes when bushwalking and gardening in overgrown places;
- avoid walking through long grass;
- avoid putting your hand into hollow logs or rock crevices; and
- keep pets well away from snakes and lizards.

First aid treatment for snake bites

- Do not ignore a trivial bite, especially if suspected from a Brown Snake.
- Ensure the patient (and others) are no longer at risk.
- Reassure the patient and encourage him/her to lie down and keep still. Venom is mainly distributed through the lymph system, which is heavily influenced by movement. Therefore, it is critical that the patient and the bitten part do not move.
- Start First Aid immediately.
- Contact Emergency Ambulance number - 000 (unless in outback areas).
- Do not interfere with the bite in any way - do not wash the skin and do not apply a tourniquet or chemicals.
- Apply a pressure immobilisation bandage with even pressure. Use the same pressure as for a sprained wrist or ankle. Start from over the bite site and work up the limb. Apply a second bandage starting at the fingers/toes of the bitten limb and wind as far up the limb as possible.
- Mark the location of the bite on the bandage (for venom detection in hospital).
- Bandage over clothing or cut up seams to allow access to skin.
- Immobilise the limb with a splint.
- Monitor airway, breathing and circulation.
- Transport the patient quickly and passively to hospital (preferably by ambulance). Where possible let paramedics be in total charge of extrication planning.

Mistaken identity

The Blue-tongued Lizard is common in Canberra gardens and is recognised by a stout body, stumpy legs and fleshy, blue tongue. It is not venomous but is often killed in the mistaken belief it is a snake. Many are also badly injured or killed by dogs and cats. Blue-tongued Lizards are an asset to any garden, as they feed on snails and other invertebrates. Several species of legless lizard, which are also harmless and look like snakes, also live in the ACT. Remember snakes and lizards are native wildlife and are protected by law in the ACT and throughout Australia.

Further information

Contact the ACT Parks and Conservation Service rangers on:
Mitchell Depot (northside) (02) 6207 2113
Athllon Depot (southside) (02) 6207 2087
Canberra Connect: 13 22 81
Website: www.tams.act.gov.au
To report sick or injured wildlife or for information on becoming an RSPCA wildlife carer, phone:
Business hours: (02) 6287 8113
After hours: 0413 495 031
Do not attempt to look after sick or injured wildlife if you are not a licensed and trained carer with RSPCA Wildlife.