New snake identification guide can help Florida residents enjoy the outdoors

February 16 2010

(PhysOrg.com) -- As spring arrives, Floridians become more active outdoors -- and so do snakes.

Encountering one of these reptiles can be nerve-racking for anyone who isn't snake-savvy, because the state is home to six venomous species, along with dozens of harmless ones.

But a new University of Florida field guide can provide some peace of mind by making it easy to identify snakes based on their appearance.

Published this month, the Identification Guide to the Snakes of Florida is geared toward users with no prior experience, presenting basic information on 46 species, says author Steve Johnson, an assistant professor with UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

"The guides that are already out there are for people who are a little more astute biologically," said Johnson, at UF's Gulf Coast Research and Education Center. "We saw a need for an ID deck aimed at the lay person, who might spot a snake and have no idea what species it is."

The 138-page, ring-bound guide contains at least one color photo of each species, a map showing its range and text including a description, preferred habitat, size, diet and scientific name. Printed on heavy, water-resistant card stock, it's rugged enough to carry anywhere and is available for $18 from www.ifasbooks.com or at 800-226-1764.

Florida's six venomous snakes get special attention, including detailed information on their appearance, as well as tips on how to avoid them and what to do in a snakebite emergency.

The guide is divided into five sections, based on a snake's overall coloration — whether it has diamonds, bands, blotches, stripes or solid color. Some species appear more than once because they have color variations or change appearance as they mature.

An example is the black racer, one of the state's most common snakes, Johnson said. Adults are solid-colored, glossy black on top with a lighter belly. But juveniles are blotched, and are often mistaken for venomous pygmy rattlesnakes.

"We hope the snakes benefit from this deck, as well," he said. "We figure if people can recognize nonvenomous species, they're more likely to leave them be."

Besides depicting native snakes, the guide covers animals often mistaken for snakes, such as glass lizards. It also includes the most significant invasive snake species in Florida, such as the Burmese python, and gives instructions on reporting them.

The guide came about because Johnson and co-author Monica McGarrity, a biological scientist at the Plant City center, received so many questions about snakes at the office and during the snake safety presentations they make for schools, government organizations and other groups.

"When we go out to give presentations we talk to people and a lot of them have specifically asked for something like this," McGarrity said.

The guide is aimed at all Floridians, but is especially helpful for

newcomers, who may not be as familiar with the state's wildlife. For more, visit snakes.shtml" target="_blank">ufwildlife.ifas.ufl.edu/dealin … _snakes.shtml .

Provided by University of Florida

Citation: New snake identification guide can help Florida residents enjoy the outdoors (2010, February 16) retrieved 27 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2010-02-snake-identification-florida-residents-outdoors.html

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