

The Hands-On Method

If you are unfamiliar with handling snakes, be aware that snakes do bite and can draw blood, but there are NO VENOMOUS SNAKES ON THE ISLANDS! If you are bitten, simply wash or disinfect the area and treat it as you might a scratch.

Step 1. Find a towel or rag and slowly approach the snake. Use the towel as cover for its head to protect yourself from bites and flying feces. Garden gloves and a long sleeve shirt can be worn as additional coverage if you are concerned about getting bitten.

Step 2. Use BOTH hands to pick the snake up. One hand should be just behind the head, and the other toward mid-body. If you are using this method to remove a snake from an area such as a basement or window well, you may want to place it in a large bucket or bag in order to transport the animal back to where it belongs; a trash can or trash bag would work well. Be sure that the container you use is large enough to contain the snake. For example, a 5-gallon bucket would NOT be large enough to keep an adult water snake from escaping!

Step 3. Release the snake in a safe location near shore. There is no need to place it far away from your property! Just place it near the shoreline, and it will be happy to get away from you. Another thing to keep in mind is that water snakes are faithful to their summer active areas. If it lives on your property, placing it down near shore will only temporarily remove it from your property.

If you own island property on or within 70 feet of Lake Erie, chances are you encounter Lake Erie water snakes quite often. This guide attempts to address many of the places and situations where snakes may likely be encountered, and what to do if or when you come across them. Many of the suggestions incorporate ways to encourage snakes to use alternative places of your property rather than areas that you use more frequently. As a shoreline property owner, there is no way to keep all Lake Erie water snakes from inhabiting your property. However, we hope that the suggestions provided will help you learn to respectfully live with and/or remove these animals instead of resorting to other (possibly illegal) methods of getting rid of the snakes on your property.



Fix the holes

Many island residents have concrete patios and porches that are "hollowed out" underneath which have turned into snake havens. Contrary to a popular belief, the water snakes did not "dig" them out to make their nests there; the snakes don't have arms, and don't really dig with their heads. However, by constantly moving in and out of the hole, over time they can make it bigger. But this does not happen overnight; keep an eye on existing holes, and repair them before they get too big. If the hole is definitely being used by snakes and you would like them to relocate, there is a potential solution. After the snakes are mobile in the spring (mid- to late May), watch the hole to see when there is activity. On a warm sunny day (above 65 degrees F) and after you have seen that the snakes in the hole are active, go to the hole with your garden hose and "flush" it out. When you are confident all the snakes have left, block the hole (perhaps with gravel) until you can fill or block it permanently.



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A LAKESHORE PROPERTY OWNER'S GUIDE TO



living with
LAKE ERIE
Water Snakes

Beaches, docks, lakeside patios, and porches

Island residents with waterfront property most likely have a beach, dock, or patio close to the water where water snakes have the potential to congregate. If it is a good place to sun your body, it is a good place for snakes as well. There is no guaranteed method of preventing snakes from invading your space permanently, but there are many things you can do to discourage them.

Clean up your stuff: Leaving things (overturned boats and kayaks, inflatable rafts, towels, beach chairs, etc) lying around close to the water for more than a few days can be an open invitation for snakes to explore new hideouts. Cleaning up is especially important for residents that have a swimming beach, but it also applies to leaving things (boat covers, life jackets, coolers, etc.) on the top of docks and patios. Snakes do not want to be seen and will seek something close to the water to hide under. If you do not want a snake to use something as shelter, then do not leave stuff lying around.

Build a brush pile

If you want to have a brush pile or compost bin on your beach, put it as far away from your swimming area as possible. These areas are preferred by snakes and they will go into them to seek shelter. If you do not have one, but still have a lot of snakes on your beach, creating a brush pile might be the answer. Encouraging snakes to use a small area may be easier than trying to discourage them from using the entire beach. If you make one, snakes will probably use it. In addition to making a brush pile, you should discourage snakes from using other areas by keeping things picked up and/or by repairing holes under structures.



Inside the house/garage/shed

Hibernation time (mid- to late October) is typically when residents encounter Lake Erie water snakes trying to get into one of these places (other species of snakes may still enter at any time of the year). However, you may also see them coming out of areas you didn't know they were hiding in during the spring emergence (mid- to late April). The best way to stop snakes from getting inside is to find out where the hole or crack is and fix it. Snakes and plenty of other animals are looking for warm places to spend the winter months, and man-made structures are just as good as rock crevices...maybe better! If you find a water snake in your garage or shed, just leave it alone; chances are it will find its way out the same way it got in. However, if you really think that it's stuck, or if you cannot share the space for one more day, you can remove it by hand.



Window wells

Most of the reports received about people coming across snakes in window wells have dealt with very small snakes finding their way in but not being able to get out. Many people keep covers on their window wells, but small snakes can still fit through the gaps. Again, the preferred approach is the Hands-On Method. Since the snakes are usually small, this shouldn't be too bad. If you happen to find a large snake in your window well, make sure you have a bag or bucket to contain the snake and follow the guidelines about wearing protective gloves and sleeves. It is a good idea to wear long pants and shoes that cover your toes since you may have to get down in the window well to get at the snake (they can bite legs and toes just as quickly as arms and fingers).

Crib docks

For those residents who have crib docks, there is little chance of discouraging snakes from using them. In reality, most residents have probably gotten used to the snakes being there. For those of you who want to rid your dock of snakes, at least for the time that you plan on using it, there are a few things that can be done.

Option 1: Do a walk-by. Simply walking back and forth near the snakes is usually enough to get them to flee the area. You may have to stomp the dock a few times for some of the more stubborn ones. For the most part, if they know you're there, they will leave. Although quite effective, this method is just a little "too close for comfort" for some folks.

Option 2: Use the hose. If you have a garden hose that will reach, you can stand several feet away from the area that you want cleared of snakes. Simply give them a squirt or two and they should leave. This could also be accomplished with a squirt gun or spray bottle, but obviously, you have to get closer.

Option 3: Use the "Buddy System." If neither of these two options will work for you, find a friend who is not afraid of snakes or, alternatively, someone who "owes you one" and have him or her resort back to the walk-by method.

Pools and garden ponds

If a snake gets into your swimming pool, typically it will have a hard time getting itself out, which means that the owner or caretaker should help it out. Fishing nets with large holes are not recommended as an acceptable means of removing snakes from unwanted areas, but a pool skimmer with small mesh-like holes would be a good alternative. To remove the snake, simply scoop under its body and lift it out. You may want to have a container nearby to temporarily contain the snake so that it does not go right back into the pool. The snake can then be safely released in an area that suits both the landowner and snake much better.



Lawns, gardens, and flowerbeds

Snakes enjoy basking in nice sunny places, and often these include your gardens, flowerbeds, and lawns. Unfortunately, some of the closest and most startling encounters with snakes occur in these places, often because you are down at a snake's level. Again, there is no guaranteed method of discouraging snakes from using these places, but there are things you can do to minimize these encounters.

Option 1: Gardens and flowerbeds. Some people use birds of prey "scarecrows;" others use naphthalene (the active ingredient in mothballs) products such as Snake-A-Way® and feel that these have been successful. There is still debate about the effectiveness of naphthalene products in keeping snakes from using areas but, sometimes, using preventative measures helps residents overcome their fear of running into snakes while working in the garden or flowerbeds – this increased use by humans indirectly discourages snakes from your property.

Option 2: Lawns. If your lawn borders the shoreline, leaving a buffer zone (1-3 ft in width) between the shore and your manicured lawn (where you mow) may keep the snakes from using the areas that you don't want them to. This buffer provides a safe refuge for the snakes to bask in without the risk of you hitting them with your lawn mower. You also may want to try planting some native vegetation (e.g., Virginia creeper or wild grape) on the nearby rocks if plants aren't growing there already. By providing some cover within the snakes' natural refuge area, you may encourage them to stay closer to the rocks, and farther from your lawn. Creating a brush pile may also help. Additionally, it is suggested that shoreline property owners walk through the lawn (especially by the buffer strip) to scare away snakes that might be in the way of the lawn mower. Many residents may walk the lawn for other reasons such as clearing away large sticks or cleaning up after their pets, so this can be a good opportunity to clear the yard of snakes as well.

There are other species of non-venomous snakes (fox snakes, blue racers) that may crawl into living or storage areas in the summer months. If you find one of these snakes in one of your dwellings, it may be an indication that you have other "residents" as well. These snakes are mice/rat/rabbit/bird eaters and will track their prey into places where they may be living. This is another reason to find that hole and fix it! You may attempt to use the hands-on method, and remove these snakes as well.