Wise as Serpents

by Mark Shoup

Be ye therefore wise as serpents — Matthew 10:16

Independence Day always reminds me of my youth, growing up in a small town and the independence that environment provided. Of course, that sense of freedom was always magnified by summer, when school was out, the days were longer, and warm weather meant fewer clothes and more opportunity to be outdoors. Outdoors was where I wanted to be most the time. As soon as I was old enough to venture away from home by myself, I was down at the crick (the Pawnee River, as it is formally known). It was there that I had my first encounter with a snake.

Like most kids, my knowledge of snakes was a volume of misinformed paranoia handed down from several generations of adults who felt that the only good snake was a dead snake. Like everyone else, I knew for a fact that every river and marsh in Kansas was certain to have its share of "water moccasins," our name for the highly-venomous cottonmouth. I did not know, had no way of knowing, that cottonmouths cannot survive the cold Kansas winter and that none had ever been spotted in Kansas.

So when I slipped through the trees to my favorite fishing hole, what should I discover basking on a large rock but a water moccasin? The vile creature hadn't seen me approach, and a large cottonwood stood on the bank above the snake, close enough to the rock that I could sneak right up. And that is what I did, toting the largest rock I could carry. When I reached the tree, I leaned around it and dropped the rock smack on the that water moccasin, killed him deader 'n a mackerel with one blow. I couldn't believe it.

I can still remember proudly carrying that snake home, draped across my tackle box. My dad met me in the front yard, and I asked him if it was a water moccasin.

"Could be," he said. "I'm not sure."

Mom just poked her head out the front door, refusing to come out and examine my trophy, and told me to "get that thing out of here this minute." The snake was soon in the garbage.

Upon reflection, I now realize that my "trophy" was probably a northern water snake, common in our parts but hardly poisonous. Today, I would no more consider killing a snake than I would a cardinal. Other than animals we eat, few are more beneficial to humans than snakes.

None of this is to disparage my parents, or any others, who for generations have taught their children to fear snakes. It is natural to protect your children and, I think, somewhat instinctive to fear snakes. When my oldest boy was about four, he was following about 15 feet behind me through some tall grass in the Red Hills when he began screaming bloody murder. I wheeled and ran for him, my first thought being "RATTLESNAKE!" As I snatched him up and kept running, I realized that it wasn't a rattlesnake that had caused the commotion but a nest of yellow jackets. He had been stung eight or nine times.

In fact, insect bites in North America account for many times the deaths attributed to snakes. Scorpions alone kill more people in Mexico than all snakes combined. Of the 38 species of snakes in Kansas, only five are poisonous. Of these, the timber rattlesnake is extremely rare, and only two cottonmouths have ever been seen in Kansas, both in 1991 in the southeastern corner of the state. More importantly, only one snakebite fatality has occurred in Kansas in the past 46 years.

Still, you may ask, most snakes may not be dangerous, but what good are they? Consider this: there are 22 species of mice and rats in Kansas; many breed throughout the year; and each litter is weaned and out of the nest in about three weeks. Without the presence of snakes, rats and mice would literally overrun the countryside.

Mice and rats are not the only pests that snakes control. The state's most common snake, the bull snake, loves pocket gophers. In a joint 1926 study, researchers from the University of Wisconsin and Ottawa (Kansas) University estimated that alfalfa farmers lost $2.50 per acre in fields invaded by pocket gophers. And that's 1926 money. In a single season, a one bull snake can eat all the pocket gophers on an acre and one-half. In addition, an adult bull snake may consume dozens of mice and rats. Of course, the bull snake is only one species. Many other snakes are heavy-duty rodent eaters, and even garter snakes will devour small mice, as well as insects.

Snakes have other benefits to mankind, as well. Recent research at the University of Kansas on the shed skins of black rat snakes has yielded an essential ingredient in nicotine patches. As environmental education tools for children, snakes are hard to beat. Even those children who are afraid of snakes are fascinated, and with some gentle persuasion, most kids quickly overcome their fear. We've kept snakes at our home for a few weeks at a time, and my boys love them.

Since Adam and Eve got crossways with God because of a serpent, and the first caveman was rousted from his woolly mammoth bedroll by a bull snake, people have been afraid of snakes. Still, Matthew appreciated snakes. Original sin may have come from eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but I still think its a sin to kill a snake for no good reason. If you're going to eat it, that's another matter, but for most folks, an affinity for snake meat would be a taste they'd rather not acquire.