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Northern Water Snakes The Importance of Basking

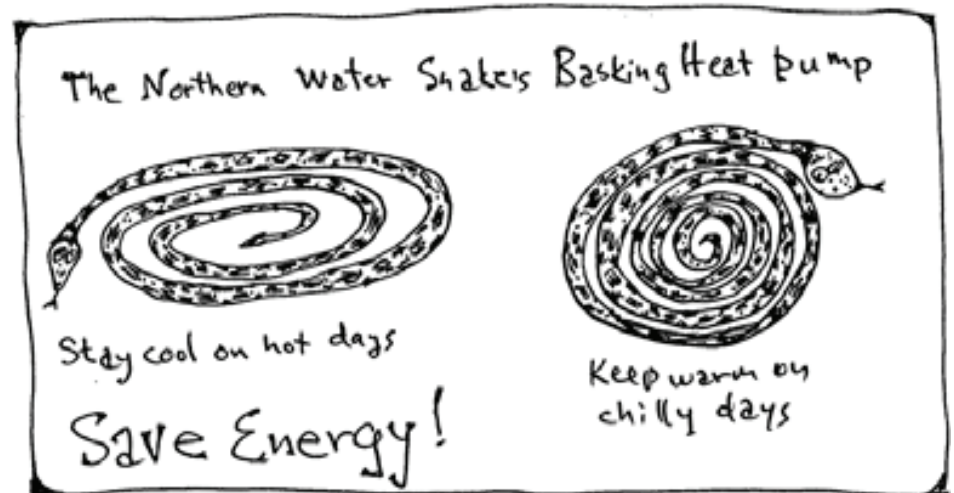
Some people have pet snakes, even big ones. We had a friend who would lift his large snake out of its terrarium and drape it around his neck. I don't remember what sort of snake this was, but it made our friend very happy and looked quite content itself.

When I was a youngster we had a pet snake that I remember clearly as being my mother's personal snake. This was not a family pet for all of us, like the cat. She named it Melissa, I always thought, because the name has a little "hiss" in it. This was a small garter snake and was kept in a glass aquarium we had, with plants and moss. I am sure mom fed her worms, also that we didn't keep her all that long. We understood her to be beautiful, remarkable, a miracle. We never learned to fear or bad-mouth snakes.

I don't see many snakes hereabouts, but a few weeks ago there was a lovely garter snake basking on a rock by the little frog pool in the garden. I'd gone over there to see how the frogs were doing. They'd suffered some harassment from our young dog, but there were still three present, also this snake. I decided that if she (thinking of Melissa's gender assignment, here) was not basking but hunting for a meal, she had a right to one of those frogs. As it happened, I never saw her again, and we still have three frogs. I built a strong wire fence around the pool to keep the dog out. The frogs can get through it.

The only other snake I have seen lately was also basking. This was a large dark snake, on a tussock of grass at a wild pond I like to visit. We surprised each other, and the snake disappeared into the water almost without a ripple. There is plenty of vegetation in the water and on the shore, perfect for this northern water snake.

These are our largest snakes. Their scientific name is *Nerodia sipedon*, and this has been translated as "a serpent whose bite causes mortification." I don't know Greek myself, but I did give a try with three dictionaries to learn what the English word "mortification" means. No luck. But anything with "mort" in



it can't be very healthy. These water snakes are not venomous, but they have long teeth meant for hanging onto wriggling and thrashing fish. And one of my books claims the bite contains an anticoagulant which can cause problems in a wound. Ticks put anticoagulant into the little bites they make, and it causes trouble—not talking about Lyme here, just soreness and slow healing.

My books also tell me that water snakes are not aggressive but will bite to defend themselves, so do not pick one up. They bite repeatedly, seriously wanting to be let go.

This is the time of year for water snakes to be giving birth. They have litters of "live young," not eggs, and these little ones can be six to twelve inches long. There also may be from twelve to sixty babies in a litter, one born right after another. They hit the ground ready to go off on their own, find their way to food and a life near water.

When young, the northern water snake has a colorful pattern with dark crossbands on the first third of the body and then a series of dorsal and lateral blotches on the back and sides on a basic background color that is pale grey to dark brown. The markings (blotches) are reddish brown to black. As the snakes get older, they get darker overall and the pattern is somewhat obscured. That pattern is good camouflage for a swimmer. It has a dappled effect. Unfortunately, folks confuse this snake with a copperhead and many northern water snakes

are killed because of this. But copperheads have a different pattern, one designed to blend in with fallen leaves in the woods. It is a bolder, more contrasty look, with big pale blotches on a reddish brown background.

There is a good book by a local herpetologist, Tom Tynning. It is one of the Stokes field guides, *A Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians* (1990). Tynning gives an account of basking and how important it is, also how careful the snake may loop itself in ovals or else in tight circular arrangement, in order to keep just the right body temperature. Snakes are "cold blooded," or poikilothermic, which means their internal body temperature varies with the surrounding temperature. We are homeothermic, or "warm-blooded," maintaining a steady internal temperature. Tynning writes that snakes spend much of their day basking, and make tiny adjustments which are critical to how alert or comfortable they are.

"Don't assume that if a snake isn't moving it isn't doing anything."—Thomas E. Tynning.

— Bonner McAllester