

## SNAKEBITE

Written by Nick Martin, CTRA Secretary

July 5, 2023

I'm no expert on snakebite, but I've been hunting and studying snakes since childhood. When my horse was bitten a month ago, I declared war. As the snake casualties are mounting, I have been asked to share my experience with the Caddo Trail Riders group. Warning: some of my pictures may be disturbing.



I have lived in the Bonham area for three years now and had rarely seen any venomous snakes—just the occasional rat snake, racer, and other harmless varieties that I have been very happy to leave alone. I did, however, see the occasional water moccasin (aka cottonmouth) or copperhead on the road, and one copperhead between my horse's feet (quickly dispatched). I have never seen or heard of a rattlesnake in my immediate area, although I have seen two further west, near Lake Texoma.

For a time, I was putting out bug zappers in an effort to reduce the mosquitoes. These in turn attracted frogs, which in turn attracted two water moccasins, which I found on my porch! A friend was visiting, who insisted I not kill but relocate them, which he (not I) was plenty willing to do. I took the zappers down and have not seen any on my porch since then.

One evening at the end of May, I noticed some strange behavior in my horse, a 9-year-old mustang. He was standing in the shade of some trees on the far side of the pasture and seemed sluggish. He didn't have his usual spark, showed little interest in his evening carrots, and was occasionally tossing his head as if he had a bug in his ear. He wouldn't let me tickle his ear or upper neck, as he always does. I couldn't see anything visibly wrong with him and didn't see a need to do anything but keep an eye on him until the next morning.

The following day, when I went to feed him, it looked like a bird had dropped a mess on his face. On closer examination, he smelled awful, and there was a constant trickle of pus emerging from a wound, now evident below his ear. It was obvious he would need veterinary attention, so I took him to Dr. Katie Hayes, his regular vet.



May 31, 2023

On arrival, she immediately diagnosed snakebite, saying that she could tell from the smell of rotting tissue. She sedated him, then lanced and cleaned the wound. She gave me specific instructions and assured me he would heal in about a month. She also told me that she only sees snakebite about once a year, but that some bites can be far more serious, especially from rattlesnakes, resulting in death, permanent nerve damage, or the need to put a horse down.



May 31, 2023

There is a very happy ending to this sad story. My horse very quickly returned to his normal, naughty self. Although his wound looked frightening—a foul-smelling hole in his head the size of a baseball—his healing progressed rapidly. It seemed almost miraculous the speed at which his wound was healing.



June 3, 2023

Dr. Hayes was exactly right. By three weeks, he was almost normal. In a month, the remains of his wound were just a little nothing—no bigger than a fingernail. It does not appear that he will have any permanent signs that anything ever happened—at worst, perhaps some white hair where he used to be black. We will see.



June 11, 2023



June 22, 2023

Meanwhile, where do I go from here? I cannot, will not, risk this happening again—to my horse, or three goats, or guardian dog. What could I do?

I came up with a threefold plan. Friends advised me to get chickens or Guinea hens, but online investigations suggested these would be of limited help, if any. The best anti-snake *domesticated* animal (mongoose and roadrunners excluded) seemed to be the pig. I contacted the only friend I know who actually had one, and she spoke very highly of them. Not only that, but she had two young Kunekune pigs needing new homes. I took them, and they have been working out surprisingly well (but still too small to protect the rest of my barnyard from snakes).



Kunekune Pigs, 4 months old

The second “fold” of my plan was a simple shoot-to-kill with shotshells in a revolver. But how to find them? I began a nightly and morning patrol of my two small ponds, teeming with fish and frogs, which in turn (like the zappers) attract the snakes that eat them. I soon found and shot five moccasins.

The last approach was to create a “snake trap” perimeter. I set sheets of waferboard and metal siding around the ponds and fences (outside the pasture) and checked them daily, lifting them with a garden rake (watch where you put your hands and feet!). I soon found a moccasin under one and a copperhead under another. These traps do not add to the snake numbers, but they make them much easier to find, as they like to hide in such snug places. I also find quite a few harmless snakes on my patrols and in my traps, but I leave them free to be as they are.

In all thus far, the count has been eight moccasins and two copperheads found on my property. That ratio supports my belief that my horse was bitten by a *moccasin*, whose venom is far more destructive than a copperhead’s. Given the site of his wound, I also suspect that he rolled on it, as these snakes are not aggressive, and if he’d been bitten while grazing, it would more likely have been on a leg or near the muzzle. Some things, of course, we will never know.



Copperhead Found under Sheet Metal

A final recommendation. My understanding is that horses are unable to breathe through the mouth, so one of the greatest risks with snakebite when on the muzzle is swelling of the nose to the point of blocking the airways. This has been known to kill a horse, not from the bite *per se* but from the inability to breathe. It is therefore recommended to keep handy a length of about 8" of rubber tubing (or even garden hose) and some lubricant. This can help maintain an open airway until the swelling subsides.



Rubber Tubing and Lubricant

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