Snakes: Hunters and Hunted

There are over 2,600 different kinds of snakes in the world today. They range in size from small, wormlike creatures to giants that can be more than 20 feet long. Snakes use their strong muscles to propel their bodies over the ground, up tree trunks, or through the water. Their long, flexible backbones allow them to bend and coil in any direction.

All snakes eat animals. They feed on such prey as lizards, birds, frogs, toads, fish, mice, rabbits, and even other snakes. A snake’s sharp sense of smell helps it find food. To explore the area around it, the snake flicks out its tongue and collects odor particles. When the tongue returns to its mouth, sensory cells help it identify the odors. Rattlesnakes and some other snakes have pit organs on their heads that can detect heat from nearby warm-blooded animals. With this special sense, they can track mammals and birds either day or night.

Poisonous or not, snakes are formidable hunters. Some search for prey. Others lie quietly in ambush waiting for a meal to come by. Snakes use their sharp teeth to catch and grip animals. They don’t chew their prey. Instead, they swallow them whole. Because their upper and lower jaws are loosely connected, they can even swallow meals that are larger than their own heads. Many snakes kill their victims before eating them. Boas and pythons wrap their coils around the body of their prey and then tighten the coils until the animal suffocates. Poisonous snakes kill their prey with a poison called venom. Fangs in the snake’s upper jaw inject this deadly poison into the animal’s body.

Snakes are hunted and eaten by a number of animals. To protect themselves, snakes have developed a variety of defenses. Many have colors and patterns that blend in with their surroundings and help them hide. Some poisonous snakes have bright, conspicuous colors that warn enemies that they are dangerous and should be left alone. There are harmless snakes that mimic the colors and markings of these poisonous snakes so that they, too, will be avoided. Spitting cobras detect attacks by spraying venom into the eyes of their attackers. They can shoot this venom out of their fangs for a distance of over six feet. The hognose snake has one of the most unusual ways of defending itself. When an enemy confronts it, this nonpoisonous snake puffs itself up, hisses, and strikes with its mouth closed. If this display fails to scare the animal away, it rolls over on its back, opens its mouth, sticks out its tongue, and plays dead.