

Where do snakes go when it's cold?

Snakes often disappear in the winter months, but does that mean they are gone until summer?

The answer is no... and yes. Let us explain. snakes

Do snakes hibernate?

Many people are familiar with hibernation, the winter practice of some mammals such as bears, and even some plants. It is commonly thought that snakes also hibernate because we don't see them as much in the colder months, but this assumption is mistaken and could lead to unexpected – and likely unwanted – snake run-ins.

Hibernation is the state of very deep sleep where the animals or plants will stay dormant to conserve energy until the cold season passes. For example, bears will often gorge on food to build up their fat stores then go into hibernation because their food source will be very low in the winter months. The hibernation state helps them survive the winter by lowering their body temperature, slowing their heartbeat and breathing, depressing their metabolism, and exerting little to no energy. Their bodies then use up the stored fats to maintain their necessary body processes and to keep them warm through the season.

Unlike mammals, snakes don't go into full hibernation. Instead, snakes enter a similar state called *brumation*.

What is brumation?

Since snakes are cold-blooded animals, they will become less active in the cooler months because they will be lethargic from the cold temperatures. During the winter months, snakes and other reptiles will enter brumation. While this is *similar* to hibernation, brumation is different.

Brumation does not require the same amount of sleep as hibernation. Yes, reptiles sleep during brumation. However, they wake and need to forage for food and water during this time. When necessary, they will go and find food and water then return to a state of brumation for longer periods. Because the snakes are using less energy, they can go much longer than usual between feedings.

Snake brumation can begin anytime from September to December and last until March or April, depending on the weather pattern. In addition, snakes may come out of brumation if a warm front changes the weather, warming their blood and making them more active. Snakes will

sense when the outside air is warmer or will likely notice the weather change once leaving their den to forage.

Where do snakes go during brumation?

This leads us to the question: where do snakes go when they disappear in the winter?

When snakes brumate in the wild, they typically go into warm places such as dens made by squirrels, rodents, other snakes. They will also burrow in tree stumps, caves, and deep caverns. Strategically, snakes will go into protected hiding spots that have little chance of being disrupted by wind or rain.

Oftentimes, snakes will even share dens to use the body heat from other snakes to better survive the winter. These dens can consist of males, females, babies, or even different species. As survival is the main goal during this time, they do not discriminate.

Although people may not be exploring the forest often enough to accidentally encounter a brumating snake in the wild, we're not out of the woods just yet.

In areas where the habitat is not wild – our cities and suburbs – snakes are still present and require brumation. Without a natural asylum available, they will seek areas to keep warm like crawl spaces, basements, boiler rooms, garages, woodpiles, open pipes, barns, sheds, storage spaces, or even car engines to keep warm. This creates a potential encounter (and sometimes, hazard) for you, your employees, and your customers.

What this means for you and your business

As urbanized areas are expanding and taking over more of nature, animals have to find new homes. Unfortunately, these new homes can sometimes be on our property and in our businesses. Snakes can be particularly difficult to notice because most breeds are silent and they are very adept at hiding.

Unlike some other pests, there is usually little evidence of a snake presence because they swallow their prey whole and leave no evidence behind. Therefore, many people don't even know that they have snakes on their property until they actually see one, or worse – are bitten.



However, one sign of their presence is shed skin. Known as the slough, it is usually found in rock beds, log piles, leaf litter or on tree branches. It can also sometimes be found in basements or boiler rooms where the relative humidity is higher. Snakes usually use rough textures and higher humidity to help excise their previous skin.

Although the majority of snakes we may encounter are harmless to us, they can still cause disruptions to your business. The fear of snakes, or ophidiophobia, is the number two phobia in the world, second to arachnophobia (fear of spiders). Rentokil Steritech recently studied the business impact of pests. The report showed that employee morale and its subsequent turnover was one of the major contributors to increased costs.

If a snake finds winter refuge on your property, you aren't likely to know until you're both unpleasantly surprised. Since snakes are very strategic when choosing their winter sanctuary, they won't expect activity there. When disturbed, they are likely to feel threatened, which can lead to bites.

Areas of concern include crawl spaces, sheds and garages, electrical and boiler rooms, elevator shafts, and seldom used storage spaces, such as the areas where for holiday decor sits untouched for 11 months. Spare fleet vehicles that are left sitting for periods of time shouldn't be ruled out either, as snakes have been known to find their way into the vents and near engines. Caution should be exercised when removing items that have been untouched for a while from storage. While sitting there, as a number of pests, including snakes, could have found a home in them.

Although there can be multiple types of snakes in any environment, they should all be considered poisonous until captured by a professional and identified.

How to prevent snakes from taking up residence in your space

Since snakes have little reason to be on your property, it is important to eliminate any attractive conditions. Snakes often nest in tall grass, piles of debris/rocks, lumber stacks, and areas with frequent rodent activity. Address these concerns to reduce snake pressure.

Here are a few tips to prevent snakes from nesting or brumating on your property:

- **Vegetation Management** – Ensure that the grass on your grounds is well maintained, all shrubbery is cut regularly and is trimmed back a proper distance from your building. Tall grass and unruly shrubs attract rodents as well as provide superb coverage for snakes. Unmanaged vegetation roots can also create cracks in the structure of a building, providing access inside. Having a good management program can eliminate an array of potential problems including snakes.
- **Proper Storage** – Wood piles, debris, or stacks of material should be stacked at least 12 inches above the ground on a pallet. Construction sites, lumber yards, and outdoor storage areas are ideal dens for snakes looking to brumate. However, any businesses with storage areas are susceptible if snakes can find an entry point. Keeping items stored off the ground and/or in sealed containers will let pests know that they are not welcome.
- **Exclusion** – Snakes do not chew or create holes, they simply use existing damage or breaches to enter your building or home. They enter via gaps near pipes, torn screens, open windows, cable routing, soffit damage, under crawl space fascias, and through cracks around garage and cellar doors. Sealing entry points is the first line of defense and can help reduce the need for chemical solutions later.
- **Water and Lake Management** – Snakes typically look for damp places to live, near creeks, streams, lakes and other standing bodies of water. Proper management of lakes and water features is an essential part of any pest control program. Find out more from our sister company, [SOLitude](#).

- **Eliminate the food source** – Another way to eliminate the chances of snakes taking up shelter in your place of business is to reduce their food source. Snakes often feed on rodents, frogs, and lizards. Keeping the food source availability to a minimum, will decrease the desirability of your property and thereby reduce these unwanted, slithering tenants. In this case, that means having a strong pest control program.
- **Regular service** – Developing a relationship with a trusted, experienced pest control provider will help to identify pest risks long before they actually become a problem. Regular service visits will pinpoint areas where exclusion services would be beneficial and establish a well-rounded program to eliminate pests, thereby eradicating the food source and reducing the appeal to snakes and other predators.

Why you need a professional for snake control

Snakes should not be handled without specific training and knowledge of the temperament and control techniques of each species. Even a non-venomous snake bite can lead to complications. Due to the recurved shape of snake teeth and the bacteria they have in their mouths, infection is likely. There are many products sold that claim to deter snakes such as fumigants, poisons, and irritants (such as moth balls), however, none of these are proven to work and are not recommended by Rentokil Steritech's wildlife management experts. For your safety and the safety of your employees and guests, contact a professional to handle any snake issues.

So the answer to the original question – where do snakes go in the winter? – is that they are still alive and around in the winter months, just not as active. Often, they make take up residence in what we call the “non-target areas” for a warm place to brumate. These areas include our businesses, homes, storage spaces, crawl spaces, and basements.

The expert pest professionals at Rentokil Steritech can work with you to design an integrated pest management program that is customized to address the specific risks of your business and eliminate the threat of pests.