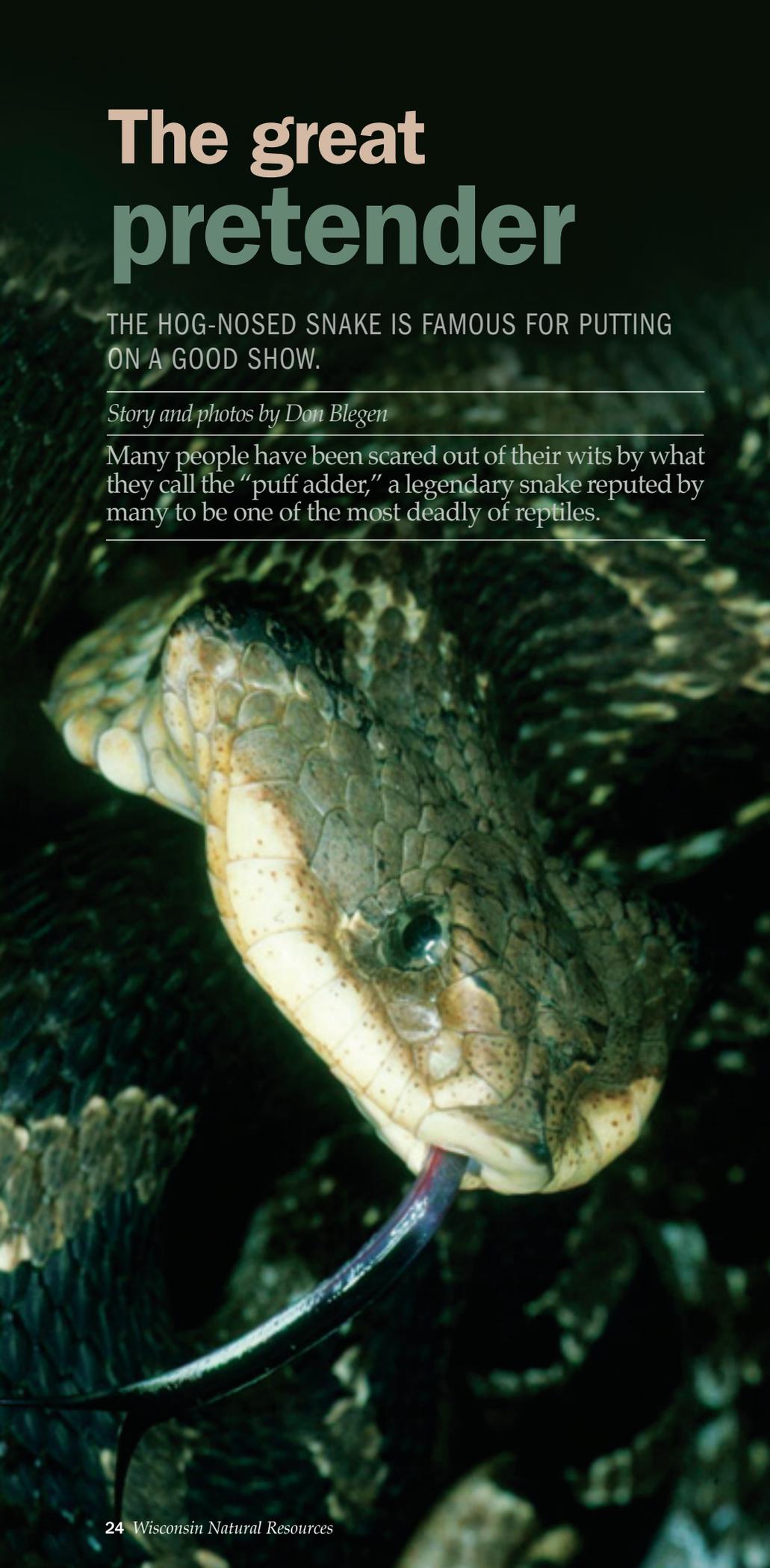


# The great pretender

THE HOG-NOSED SNAKE IS FAMOUS FOR PUTTING ON A GOOD SHOW.

*Story and photos by Don Blegen*

Many people have been scared out of their wits by what they call the “puff adder,” a legendary snake reputed by many to be one of the most deadly of reptiles.



It has other names: blow snake, spread-head snake, hoop snake and its actual name, the hog-nosed snake.

When surprised or confronted, this snake goes through a whole repertoire of aggressive behavior. It hisses; not just little hisses, but loud hisses, puffs or blows like a punctured tire losing air. Its head flattens like the triangular head of a rattlesnake. It is a thick-bodied snake like most venomous pit vipers and even increases its sinister appearance by flattening its body and spreading its throat like a cobra's hood. Its tail has a hard spike that it vibrates, and in loose leaves or brush may easily be taken for a rattlesnake's buzz. It lunges again and again, even though you may be out of reach and it gives a convincing performance of wanting to sink venomous fangs into you.

Yet it should really be called the “bluff adder,” because all of this is just that: a phony and dramatic bluff by a completely harmless snake. If you have the confidence and courage to put your hand within reach of Mr. Bluff Adder, your hand will be struck with a closed mouth. If all this high drama fails to frighten you away, it has one more trick: it will play dead.

First it convulses and spasms, ejecting foul-smelling musk and feces, rolling around in it. Then it rolls over on its back, sticks out its tongue and lies motionless. If you flip it over, it rolls on its back again, apparently believing that a convincingly dead snake must always be belly up. It won't close its eyes, because like all snakes it has no eyelids, but you get the feeling if it could, it certainly would.

This aggressive and feared snake of the Northwoods is a complete but very convincing phony. Most who meet up with it probably run away in terror, adding to its fearsome legend. It's not surprising tall tales result.

Remember the horny tip on its tail it can buzz like a rattlesnake? That hard, sharp tip has been mistaken for a “stinger” and may be the source of the hoop snake legend occasionally told in parts of North America. Legend has it the hoop snake lies in wait at the top of hills, scrutinizing the slopes below for prey. Seeing a likely victim, it takes its tail into its mouth, forms a hoop and rolls down the hill at a high speed, timing the roll and direction so as to drive the deadly stinger into its prey an instant after removing it from its mouth.

This precision attack takes lots of practice. Legend also says some prey are savvy enough to defend against hoop snakes by dodging behind tree trunks, resulting in



An eastern hog-nosed snake has a repertoire of aggressive behavior to ward off trouble. Its thick body and triangular-shaped head mimic a rattlesnake, but it is harmless.



It is named for its upturned nose, like a pig's nose, that helps it burrow in light, sandy soil.

the hoop snake stinging trees by mistake. Furthermore, some claim young hoop snakes practice their rolling and timing on elm trees, causing the envenomization and consequent death of many trees most people mistakenly think died of Dutch elm disease, oak wilt or other infections.

Hoop snakes then make their way back up to the hilltops, and are vulnerable to enemies when they do so. If all the hissing, striking and playing dead fails to ward off an enemy, as a last resort they take tail in mouth and swallow themselves, thereby disappearing into invisibility. Once danger has passed, they regurgitate themselves and take up a position again on a hilltop, lurking to attack their next victim.

So much for legend. You will have to decide for yourself how much of this information may be stretching the truth. But there are some facts beyond reproach.

The eastern hog-nosed snake gets its name from its upturned snout, like a pig's nose, which is used for burrowing. Its range is limited to areas of light, sandy soil which makes for easier burrowing.

Hog-nosed snakes are remarkably varied in color. Some are spotted, others solid; some are mostly brown, tan or black. Others change color with age. They all, however, have the upturned nose, the hornlike tail tip and the repertoire of bluffing and playing possum. No matter the color, spotted or solid, the behavior and upturned

nose give them away.

They feed almost exclusively on toads. Toads have toxic skin secretions that protect them from most predators. Anyone who has had a young dog go after a toad, only to spit it out, gag, foam at the mouth, vomit and even in rare cases die, knows toad toxins are pretty potent. Hog-nosed snakes are immune to the effects. Toads also puff themselves up as a defense mechanism, making it impossible for an enemy to swallow them. Hog-nosed snakes have rear fangs and specialized teeth that puncture and deflate the swollen toad, making this defense useless. Research also shows they have venom especially effective against toads.

This raises an interesting question: If the hog-nosed snake is a rear-fanged snake, then it is distantly related to such venomous snakes as the African boomslang, which has been responsible for fatal bites. What would happen if it did not strike with a closed mouth and actually did bite you?

There have been such cases, though rare, and the only result has been slight swelling and redness, not much different from a small cut, laceration or bee sting. So the puff adder, blow snake, spreadhead snake, hoop snake, whatever you wish to call it, is indeed harmless. Rather than screaming and running, turn around and take another look at one of the most outrageous — yet most interesting — phonies in the animal kingdom, the eastern hog-nosed snake, perhaps better named the “great pretender” or “bluff adder”! ❧

*Don Blegen is a photographer, author and retired teacher of biology, English and photography who writes from Spring Valley.*