

Water Snake Behavior

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By Bill Love

I recently saw a wild water snake grab and eat a piece of fish. The snake was about 2 to 3 feet long. It came crawling along the shore and grabbed a discarded tail and swam off with it in its mouth. I was blown away that a snake would take nonmoving food like that.

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Many people have witnessed snakes, such as water snakes (*Nerodia* spp.) and racers (*Coluber* spp.), pulling dead prey items off road surfaces. The scent of prey alone is enough to whet the appetites of hungry prowlers. More than likely, those snakes were moseying along when an enticing smell was encountered, and they decided to set a spell and eat.

Roadkills provide a source of unending food; unfortunately, the hunters often meet the same fate while they're eating.

Similarly, many aquatic carnivores frequent docks where fish are gutted. I hadn't heard of anyone seeing snakes among the turtles, gators, birds and other fish that usually gather for these snacks, but I'm not surprised.

Your letter stirred an old memory of a mass-feeding technique that a herp collector/wholesaler friend used to feed the hordes of baby garter and water snakes born at his holding facility in Florida. Catching enough tiny frogs to feed them all was not feasible. Providing enough small fish that could easily be captured by the hundreds of neonates was also not practical. The solution he devised worked because of the same tendency of snakes to scavenge that you related.

He took whole fish from the local canal (catfish, sunfish, gars, etc.) and put them through an old-fashioned, hand-cranked meat grinder – the kind used to make sausage or ground beef. Out came a pale, scaly mush that resembled lumpy cat food. He spooned lumps on paper plates and spread them in the outdoor pens housing the snakes.

Dozens of tiny baby snakes approached the plates and dove into the gruel head first and with great gusto. They attacked the piles repeatedly and pulled back with mouthfuls of fish meat. After swallowing their prizes a short crawl away, they returned for more. I might not have believed the method would work without watching the feast with my own eyes.