

Know Snakes' Rights!

In Missouri, it is technically illegal to kill copperheads because all snakes native to the state are protected by the Wildlife Code of Missouri. They are classified as "nongame" species, meaning there is no open season for hunting or killing them.

However, the law includes a “realistic exception” for safety: you may kill a venomous snake if it poses an **immediate threat** to people or property.

What Defines an “Immediate Threat”?

While the law doesn't provide a single checklist, Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) guidelines and legal provisions clarify what situations typically qualify as an immediate threat:

- **Proximity and Striking Distance:** A threat is generally defined by the snake being in such “close association” with people that a bite is likely to occur. For example, a copperhead on your porch, near a doorway, or in a play area where it is “in a position to strike” is often considered a threat.
- **Ability to Retreat:** Under self-defense principles, if you can safely move away from the snake and remove the danger without killing it, you are generally expected to do so. A snake seen in the distant woods or passing through the far end of a yard is not an immediate threat.
- **Property and Livestock Protection:** You are permitted to protect your property. If a snake is actively “damaging property” — such as a snake getting into chicken eggs or threatening livestock — killing it may be permitted.
- **Inside a Structure:** A snake that has entered a home, tent, camper, or other occupied living structure is widely viewed as a threat that justifies action.
- **Lack of Provocation:** The defense of “self-defense” may not apply if you recklessly provoke the animal (e.g., trying to pick it up or harassing it) and then kill it.

Safer Alternatives

Most bites occur when people try to kill or handle venomous snakes. To avoid legal issues and injury, experts recommend:

- **Give it space:** Most snakes will move along if left alone.
- **Use a hose:** A gentle stream of water from a garden hose can often encourage a snake to leave your yard.

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