

Snake Bite!

Springtime and its transition to summer is a magical time in Northern Virginia. If you are near marshland, the sound at night of peep frogs is unmistakable. If you are on a farm, new calves are seen appearing on the pasture each day. And no matter where you live, the blooming colors of redbud, dogwood, and viburnum are luminous – especially on a moonlit night.

The sights, sounds, and colors of spring and summer also herald the awakening of wildlife – which for dog owners warrants a little extra caution.

Canine Curiosity

The American Brittany is a hunting breed, and you can bet your bottom dollar if there is a woodchuck hiding along the field's edge, your Brittany will find him – and perhaps corner him, triggering a stand-off. The chattering of a woodchuck and the barking of a dog are the least of our worries. But a bite – and possibly infection, including the possibility of rabies – makes such an encounter worrisome to man and animal alike.

At night, one must be on guard for skunks, which if cornered can deliver a nasty bite beyond the spray. Racoons and Opossums are ubiquitous and, although the latter is more passive, they may also carry the potential to deliver an infectious bite wound.

This makes an evening walk with your Brittany more than just a ritual saunter while you make telephone calls and let the dog attend to his business; on the contrary, both man and dog need to be on guard.

But no matter how well prepared, there is nothing that surprises with more alarm than an encounter with a snake.

Water Snakes

Fortunately, Northern Virginia is not known to support any species of venomous water snakes. Brittanys love the water. The breed overheats easily and when a Brittany spots a stream or a body of water it is prone to plunge right in.

If your dog is one of these water-lovers, you will likely see non-venomous water snakes from Spring through Summer. As you head towards southern Virginia, however, one needs to be on the look-out for the venomous Water Moccasin.

And climate change is certainly advancing this venomous water snake boundary northwards.

When your Brittany jumps into a creek and startles a snake in the water, for now in Northern Virginia you can be sure the water snake will be non-venomous and more frightened than the dog. Not so the case with copperheads and rattlers.

Copperheads and Rattlesnakes

These venomous vipers do inhabit Northern Virginia, especially in the Blue Ridge and Shenandoah mountains.

The Copperhead inhabits virtually all parts of Virginia, and this is the one venomous snake you are likely to encounter if you and your dog spend time together outdoors.

Rattlesnakes – the Eastern Diamondback – can deliver a fatal bite. The good news is that as few as 7,000 people a year in the U.S. are bitten by rattlesnakes. There is no hard data on how many dogs are bitten, but even if you assume the number of snake bites for dogs is much greater than snakebites of humans, snake bite is not a common occurrence.

That said, it is possible in Northern Virginia that your dog may encounter a copperhead or rattlesnake.

The dog, hopefully, will instinctively pull back. But Brittanys are notoriously curious, especially with their noses, so there is the chance their hunting instinct will trigger a bite encounter.

If such an incident transpires, it is important to know what you can do.

Vaccination – A Good Option

If you hunt or hike in country known to be inhabited by venomous snakes, your veterinarian may encourage you to get your dog vaccinated. The veterinary practice I take my Britt to is Blue Mountain Animal Clinic in Luray, Virginia, which is located literally in the shadow of Stony Man Mountain in the Shenandoah National Park.

Folklore has it that one of the canyons on the west-face of Stony Man - Kettle Canyon - is “thick” with snakes.

If you are hunting or hiking with your dog in such a place, it would be wise to consider an anti-venom vaccination.

Snake Bite 101

But if your dog is not vaccinated, and there is a snake bite, treatment is like treating a fellow hiker.

Dr. Johnny Clark, DVM, a Virginia Tech graduate who has teamed with other V-Tech grads to form Blue Mountain Animal Clinic in Luray, VA offers this advice:

“If a bite occurs, remember, not all snake bites are equal. About 20 to 30 per cent are “dry bites” with little if any venom deposited and no associated toxicity. The more pain/swelling/discoloration/distress generally indicates a more serious bite.

“In this situation, the dog will usually not allow anything to be done to the wound and you are better off just getting to a veterinarian as quickly as possible, preferably within two hours.

“Rattlesnake bites tend to be worse. Most tissue reaction starts right away, but I did have one dog who did not exhibit tissue damage for around 18 hours.

“One very bad summer we treated 25 venomous snake bites. Five required anti-venin. In my experience antivenin is amazing. The sooner it is given, the better it will work. Adverse reactions to anti-venin are possible but I have never seen one.

“I have dogs in our practice who have been vaccinated for pit vipers but so far none have been bitten so I have no personal experience with efficacy.

“However, years ago we had a Chihuahua who over a two-year period was bitten on three different occasions by copperheads. Something about protecting a woodpile!

“Keeping in mind all bites are not equal, the first bite about killed the chihuahua, the second bite about half, the third bite like nothing happened. We were ready to put the Superman cape on him!

“A side note, my experience is pit viper bites are much more lethal to cats.

“Most bites we see occur between Memorial and Labor Day.

“Many veterinarians may be closed on these holidays and weekends, the very days when you may be enjoying a hike or hunt with your dog.

“Probably the best way to protect your dog when hiking is to keep them on a short leash next to you and perhaps have a phone number and general idea of where 24-hour emergency care is located.

“In Northern Virginia, the three primary emergency clinics used are: Winchester (540) 662-7811; Charlottesville (434) 202-1616; and Verona (540) 248-1051. These centers have anti-venin on hand.”

Summary/Recap

- Consider an anti-venin vaccination. Ask your veterinarian about this.
- If your dog is bitten, rinse the wound with water to remove some venom, and get your dog quickly to a veterinary hospital equipped to administer anti-venin.
- Keep as calm as possible so as not to excite your dog.

Sounds easy, but with adrenaline rushing through your and the dog’s system there is no doubt such a trauma will be unnerving.

With Spring now behind us and Summer just beginning, it is a good time to consult your veterinarian about what we as humans need to be looking for in the way of protecting our dogs.

Let us not forget the basics: the dog’s monthly Nexguard dose to ward off ticks and fleas, as well as the dog’s monthly heartworm preventative.

So long as we remain alert on behalf of our dogs whenever we take to the woods, the Spring and Summer season will be beautiful and enjoyed. And even if there is an emergency, we will all be prepared.

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