

## Making Ripples

### “Ring-necked Snakes”

by Amanda Bancroft

“Judge me by my size, do you?” says Yoda and our local Ring-necked Snake, *Diadophis punctatus*. Sometimes, the best presents come in small packages. This harmless snake happens to be my most favorite, admittedly because it’s quite cute! Typically less than a foot long and about as wide as a pinky finger, it’s one of our smallest native snakes. The world’s smallest snake, *Leptotyphlops carlae* found in Barbados, can fit comfortably on a quarter!

But what good are they and why should we stop squishing them, which appears to be a popular sidewalk activity in Fayetteville? Besides respect for all sentient beings, these snakes are useful to our local ecosystem and gardens. They aid in biodegradation and control pest populations, as well as feeding other predators (almost every other predator finds them a tasty meal). They’re important for research and education, often used in school settings to teach children. Technically, they do have venom, but it doesn’t threaten human life and feels like a bee sting if bitten, and biting humans is a rare behavior for ring-neck snakes.

These are beautiful and interesting snakes to watch, and they’re quite common so you don’t have to expend much effort to find one in town. When threatened, it turns over to reveal a brightly colored rainbow belly while curling into ringlets that weave the colors together. The underside of the tail can be vivid red, with typically a yellow-to-orange middle belly. The backside is usually blue-gray or greenish-gray, and sometimes brown or appearing black. Sometimes they have black spots along the belly in addition to that wonderful collar. The golden ring around its neck stands out in contrast against the dark head and back, which possibly aided with their popularity as pets (they come with built-in collars!).

Our local ring-necks can perform such feats as swallowing a frog whole. With frog’s feet sticking out from the jaw, they look like snakes with moth antennae. They eat small frogs, lizards, earthworms, salamanders, and insects. It takes three years for them to reach sexual maturity, with females growing bigger than the males despite the males’ superior size as hatchlings. Females lay about three to ten eggs at a time, but you might see eggs from different females laid in the same location. Adults do not stay near the eggs to protect them. Without parental care, there is high mortality among the young. But in the wild, they are thought to live up to twenty years and have been recorded living past ten years.

Although they are nocturnal, during the day you might find them sunning themselves on a rock or slithering across a grassy hiking trail or sidewalk. They are not aggressive and can easily be handled by gentle fingers. Ring-necks are the underdog of snakedom, and getting a break from us humans can mean a lot when everything (including other snakes) is out to get them.

Amanda Bancroft is a Master Naturalist and volunteers with her husband Ryan for their solar-powered online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: [www.RipplesBlog.org](http://www.RipplesBlog.org).