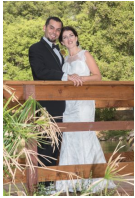
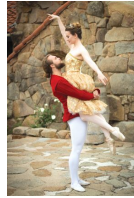




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Nature News: Living In The Realm Of Rattlesnakes



To the untrained eye, this gopher snake may be mistaken for a rattlesnake. However, take note of the narrower head and lack of rattle at the end of the tapered tail. Photo by Angela McLaughlin

By Angela McLaughlin - Ramona Home Journal • Thu, May 17, 2018

Hiking along a dirt trail in the local foothills, you hear a small rustle coming from the nearby bushes and realize you've stumbled across a snake. Many reptiles are more active now that the warmer weather has made an appearance — including rattlesnakes. Though they may strike fear into the hearts of those who encounter them, they are important animals to have on the landscape.

There are three kinds of rattlesnakes found in the coastal and mountain regions of San Diego County — the Western rattlesnake, speckled rattlesnake and red diamond rattlesnake. Sidewinders are found in the desert regions.

Christine Barton, Director of Operations at the Fund for

Animals Wildlife Center, says the Southern Pacific rattlesnake, a subspecies of Western rattlesnake, is most commonly encountered.

The main features of rattlesnakes include the wide, triangular head with narrow neck, elliptical-shaped pupils as opposed to round ones, and a rattle at the end of the tail. Keep in mind that it is possible for the rattle to be missing or broken, so the absence of a rattle does not mean it is not a rattlesnake. Also, they do not always use their rattle in warning.

It is also important to be aware that other snakes may mimic rattlesnake behaviors. There are many species of non-venomous snakes that live in the region, as well, and if residents are unfamiliar with them, some may be mistaken for rattlesnakes. Gopher snakes have been observed flattening their heads and vibrating the ends of their tails, but they are a non-venomous species. That is why it is important to look at other characteristics, not just behaviors.

A knee-jerk response from residents may be to kill any rattlesnake they encounter, but the snakes play an important role in the ecosystem. By preying on rodents, they help keep the populations under control. They also act as prey for other animals, such as kingsnakes and large birds — and even roadrunners.

Rattlesnakes are ectothermic, or cold-blooded, meaning they cannot regulate their body temperatures and instead rely on their surroundings to provide heat. That's why they are more active in the warmer months and during warmer times of the day. They may be found resting on rocky outcroppings, absorbing the heat from the sun and the rocks.

Barton says they may also be found warming themselves on hot pavement, which puts them in danger of getting run over by a vehicle.

Though venomous, rattlesnakes do not seek out humans to cause harm — most of them are docile unless threatened or provoked and would rather retreat than strike. It is commonly said that baby rattlesnakes are more venomous than their adult counterparts, and while this is not true (adults have more virulent venom than juveniles), juveniles may be more likely to bite if threatened.

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"The babies are new, they're scared, and they're more likely to strike," says Barton, adding that when they do, they typically use all their venom, whereas an adult may perform a "dry bite" where they don't inject anything at all.

Barton says bites may occur if a snake is stepped on or startled, but that most occur when someone is trying to catch them. If bit, seek medical attention immediately.

If the snake is in an area where it will not pose a threat to a human or companion animal, it is best to leave it alone, and let the snake move along on its own.

If the snake is in a backyard frequented by children or animals, or along a heavily trafficked route, moving it may be the best option. For those unfamiliar with safe-handling practices, it is advised to call a professional. There are several wildlife removal services in the area, but it is important to find one that does not use lethal methods for removal.

Barton suggests calling Tom Minga, rattlesnake specialist for Snake Solutions, who specializes in removal and relocation, as well as rattlesnake avoidance training for dogs and humans. Call 619-322-4569.

Unfortunately, our canine companions seem all-too-curious about these scaled critters. When hiking, it is important to keep your dog on a leash. If a bite does occur, bring the animal to the vet for treatment immediately. As we live in an area where encounters with rattlesnakes are not only possible, but probable, it may be a good idea to look into rattlesnake vaccines offered at local vet clinics. Getting the vaccine does not mean the dog is immune to the venom — they will still need to go to the vet as soon as possible. Contact your vet to learn more about the pros and cons of the vaccine.

There is no easy way to keep rattlesnakes out of a yard. It is important to note that repellent products such as lime powder are very caustic and can cause serious injuries to children and other animals. The best method for safety is to remain aware and know whom to call if you need assistance.

As with all animals that we humans share the landscape with, each has its purpose and its place. It is important to stay informed to keep both humans and animals safe.

So, if you stumble across a rattlesnake, take a moment to appreciate this fascinating creature while keeping safety in mind.

Visit www.wildlife.ca.gov/News/Snake or www.californiaherps.com.

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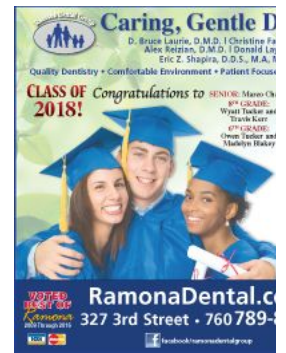
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