

## SOUTHWESTERN HERPETOLOGISTS SOCIETY

# WHAT TO DO (and what NOT to do) in RATTLESNAKE COUNTRY!



*As many as 45,000 poisonous snake bites occur each year in the United States, most of these from rattlesnakes. While only 15 to 20 of these are fatal (more people die annually of bee stings, being struck by lightning or being struck by golf balls!), the rest suffer a painful, often dangerous and debilitating recovery time. Snakes do not bite people out of an aggressive desire to kill, but because they react to what their instincts interpret as an attack. Probably 90% of all snake bites could be prevented by following one simple rule:*

**"ALWAYS WATCH WHERE  
YOU PUT YOUR  
HANDS AND FEET."**

In essence, the practice of this rule is quite simple: You should be able to **SEE** your feet and hands at all times when in areas inhabited by venomous reptiles.

Watch where you put your feet: Watch the trail ahead of you. This will not only prevent your coming up unexpectedly on a resting rattler, but will help prevent falls over equally unexpected rocks and ticks! **DON'T** step over a log or rock if you can't see what might be below it on the other side. **DO** step up on top of such as object, then way out and over it. **DO** wear good, high boots with loose jeans outside them when hiking through brushy country that may be inhabited by rattlers.

Watch where you put your hands: **DON'T** climb a ledge or rocky hillside by reaching up beyond sight for your next handhold; who knows what may be sunning itself on that next ledge? **DON'T** reach under a rock or log that you don't know what's under. **DON'T** put your hands into a hole you can't see into.

Most importantly, **DON'T** play around with rattlesnakes! At least one third of all snake bites occur to people who for one reason or another, are trying to do something to the snake - kill it, tease it, catch it. An act of bravado can be expensive; a momentary lapse of attention can be dangerous.

If a rattlesnake is in an inhabited area, it should be captured and relocated by an experienced herpetologist if possible; it should be destroyed only as a last resort.

If the rattler is in the wild, let it go its own way. It will get away from you as fast as it can, and rattlesnakes are an important part of the natural work and the balance of nature.

## RATTLESNAKE FACTS

Rattlesnakes are the only dangerously venomous snakes in California. We have no Coral Snakes, Copperheads or Water Moccasins, which are the only other dangerous snakes in the United States.

A **DEAD** rattlesnake should be avoided. Many people have been bitten by the reflex action of dead snakes even badly mangled ones. Rattlesnakes killed in inhabited areas should have the head cut off and buried; other wise, rattlers should not be killed at all.

You cannot tell a rattler's age by counting the rattles. A new segment is gained each time the snake sheds its skin, which may be two to five times a year. Additionally, the longer rattles of older snakes frequently breaks off.

Baby rattlesnakes are not more "deadly" than adults. However, they are poisonous and capable of biting from the moment of birth. The venom is in the head; the rattles are harmless. The rattlesnake does not always rattle before striking.

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A rattler will not "attack" you. It is more afraid of you than you are of it. If it has an escape route, it will take it. You can move much faster than the fastest rattler.

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## IDENTIFICATION OF VENOMOUS SNAKES IN CALIFORNIA

As mentioned before, there is only one kind of venomous snake in California - the rattlesnake. There are six species of rattlesnakes in California, but all have the characteristics described below in the figure on the right. No other snakes in California are dangerously venomous (a few have very mild venoms that do not affect people). And most have characteristics like the figure below on the left. All snakes, venomous or not, are important members of the natural community and are vital to the balance of nature. No snake should be needlessly killed. (NOTE: These characteristics are not necessarily useful outside of California, and particularly not out of the country).

HEAD:  
narrow, barely  
distinguishable  
from neck

### NON-VENOMOUS SNAKES



BODY:  
relatively  
thin or  
narrow

TAIL:  
tapers to a  
long, thin  
point (usually),  
NEVER with  
rattles

### VENOMOUS SNAKES



HEAD:  
broad,  
"triangular"

BODY:  
heavy or  
relatively  
"fat" in  
appearance

TAIL:  
blunt, usually  
ending in a cluster  
of modified scales  
-- the "rattle" --  
(except in baby  
snakes); never  
tapers to a thin  
point