

Living with rattlesnakes

By: Larry Southard, Oracle Fire Department

For those of us who live in the desert, the chances of encountering a rattlesnake are fairly high. Although encounters with poisonous snakes can be dangerous, most are simply just alarming.



Rattlesnakes do not see you as a food source, so they will usually bite, only in self defense. Intentionally agitating one, or accidentally stepping on one may very well produce a bite.

The most effective long term solution to avoiding an encounter with a rattlesnake around your home, is to modify it's surroundings. Rattlesnakes are hunters, primarily feeding on rodents, small rabbits and birds. Removing outside food sources, such as pet food and bird seed, will encourage their prey to relocate elsewhere. The snakes will usually follow their food source.

Snakes do not make their own shelters. They will utilize pre-existing shelters such as rodent nests, wood piles, rock crevices, or even under your home. Removing these shelters and/or blocking access to these shelters, will encourage the snakes to relocate to another area.

Always use tools and wear gloves and other protective clothing when removing an animal shelter. Never reach your hand into an area that you cannot see. Rattlesnakes blend in with their surroundings and can become almost invisible. They'll probably be aware of your presence long before you're aware of theirs.

Some adult rattlesnakes have actually evolved into not using their rattles for warnings. Baby rattlesnakes, which many species are born during this time of

year, are born with fangs and venom but will not produce a rattle for their first 3 weeks. A visual warning may be all that you'll get.

The attached picture shows a large Mojave Rattlesnake (commonly misnamed a Mojave Green) trapped in a wire fence in the backyard of Oracle residents Jim and Lynn Perez Hewitt. Firefighters Jonathon Torres and Tyler McGovern very carefully and delicately, cut away at the wire fencing to remove the snake.

During the rescue, both firefighters were wearing full structural firefighting protective clothing. Even so, this was an intense operation, knowing that Mojave Rattlesnakes are the most toxic snake in North America and they are oftentimes very aggressive. The four foot long snake didn't show any signs of appreciation for being rescued from an almost certain death.

Studies have shown that snakes have a difficult time surviving, if relocated much further than a few hundred feet away from where they were captured. Realizing that many folks still use the "shovel method" for snake removal, we typically take snakes to an unpopulated area of town for release.

Our firefighters are not very fond of rattlesnakes, but we do realize that they play an important role our ecological system and we encourage people not to kill them if they don't have to. Also, approaching live snakes, can be much more hazardous than simply leaving them alone. Oracle, Mammoth and San Manuel Fire Departments all provide reptile relocation services.

What to do if you are bitten by a rattlesnake:

- Get some distance between yourself and the snake.

- Remain calm and activate the 911 system.

- Remove jewelry, watches and shoes from the affected area.

- Place the bitten area near the level of your heart.

- Get a prompt transport to a hospital emergency room.

What NOT to do if bitten:

- Do NOT apply ice.

- Do NOT make an incision of any kind.

- Do NOT use a tourniquet.

- Do NOT administer alcohol, drugs or medications.

- Do NOT use electric shock treatment.

Remember that many snake bites are actually "dry" (without venom) bites. It would be a shame to lose an arm or leg due to an improper medical intervention. Also remember that more than half of all rattlesnake bites are provoked by the person bitten.

People and rattlesnakes can peacefully co-exist, and if you're careful, the chances of being bitten are very low. The best protection against snakes, is awareness, knowledge and prevention.