

Living with Rattlesnakes

With some background on area wildlife, I'm Calhoun County Game Warden Mike Mitchell.

Area snakes are as much a part of Texas as cattle, oil and beautiful sunsets. But with each returning year come an increased number of encounters with them. Some are dangerous while others are interesting to view.

There are over 72 species in Texas, of which several occur in our area. Learning how to identify them, and knowing which are venomous, can save a lot of headache and heartache.

Perhaps the most discussed snake is the Diamondback Rattlesnake. These are large, often growing to over four feet long. They will strike even if not rattling first. About seven to 10 people are killed annually by this snake's venom.

A rattlesnake fang has an opening near the end, connected by a duct to a poison gland behind the eye. Normally, the fang lies against the roof of the mouth, but when needed, the fang is pushed forward and the poison injected into the deepest part of the wound. It is important to note: the snake mostly uses the poison to kill prey for food, and less for defense.

Snakes actually play a crucial role in our ecosystem by helping control rodent populations. Because of their usefulness, it is important for residents, especially those in rural areas, to be able to tell which kind of snake they see and know whether or not they are venomous. It's unlikely that you are going to be able to get rid of them, so learning as much as you can about them is important.

If you are unfortunate enough to receive a snakebite, get medical attention as quickly as possible. Bites affect different people and locations differently, so it's important not to treat the bite without proper training and equipment.

The old remedy of cutting over the bite and sucking out the poison is strongly discouraged. There is a far greater chance of serious injury from the cut, or ensuing infection, than from the snakebite. Just stay calm and get to a doctor.

Snakes are ectothermic; their body temperature adjusts to that of the environment. If the air temperature is cool, they will seek warmer spots. For example, they sun themselves on rocks, which absorb heat from sunlight. In the heat of the summer they become more nocturnal, coming out in the cool of the evening or the night. They will seek protection from the heat in the shade of rocks and cover. Be careful in those areas. Watch where you put your hands and feet.

Snakes don't have ears, therefore they sense movement from vibrations rather than sound.

If you find a rattler out in the marsh then leave it alone. Go around it. Go the other way. It belongs there in nature.

Knowing a bit about snakes makes it easier to avoid them in the wild. Be careful when you are climbing onto or poking under marsh areas. Be sure you know it is safe before you put your hands somewhere questionable. That can be difficult when you are exploring, but it's important.

Texas Parks and Wildlife encourages you to enjoy the great outdoors and all the opportunities it has to offer. For more information, see our website at www.tpwd.state.tx.us.

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