

The Western Rattlesnake

Shasta-Trinity National Forest



Rattlesnakes are not as dangerous or as frightening as most people think. They are, actually, shy and secretive animals who choose to avoid confrontations with people and are seldom seen. That does NOT mean, however, that you should not be cautious when hiking, back-packing, hunting or playing in the woods. If you do see one leave it alone because, if cornered, it will defend itself.

How most people feel about rattlesnakes is based on the fact that they are not “cute and cuddly.” Because they are fierce looking and can bite, and because their warning rattle can startle us, we fear them as a threat and a menace... to be avoided and, sometimes killed at all cost.

Rattlesnakes, however, have been on this earth quite a bit longer than humans and serve a very important function in the natural cycle of things. Without them, for example, we just might be over-run with rodents. Eighty percent of a rattlesnake’s diet is made up of rodents and, in any given year, they might eat as much as 25% of the rodent population in any given area.

If you, or someone you know, is bitten immobilize the affected area and cool with ice or cold water. Get the bite victim to a doctor as soon as possible. Do not try any of the old remedies like cutting the bite and sucking out the venom, or using a snakebite kit, or using a car battery to run a current through the affected area. Your best bet is a doctor and anti-venin.



This bulge is probably a ground squirrel or a mouse!

If you think you hear a rattlesnake... **STAND STILL!** Avoid jumping or running blindly. Look carefully until you locate the snake and then make your move. Remember that harmless snakes, moving in dry leaves and grass, can sound a lot like rattlesnakes rattling.



Even “Dead” rattlesnakes can bite! So... caution is advised. Treat any rattler, dead or otherwise, with respect.

Distinctive “diamond” shaped head.

The Rattles:

Each time a rattler sheds its skin, it can add 1 rattle. Because they can shed 2 or 3 times each year, the number of rattles is NOT indicative of age. Rarely are there more than 10 or 12 rattles because the outer ones wear out and break off.



The Loreal Pits:

This is a heat sensitive structure located between the eye and the nostril. With it, they can locate their warm blooded prey. It is this “pit” which classifies the rattler as a “pit viper.”

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