

Living with Venomous Reptiles:

An encounter with a rattlesnake is a potentially dangerous situation; your knowledge about reptiles and how to avoid rattlesnakes could be invaluable.

Most reptiles are harmless. Of the venomous reptiles at Diamond Mountain, only the rattlesnake is truly a safety concern. The Gila Monster is a venomous lizard that rarely bites humans unless handled. The Sonoran Coralsnake is a small, shy snake usually less than 17 inches in length and not much bigger around than a pencil, - much smaller than the dangerous Coralsnakes of the southeastern US and tropical Mexico. Though venomous, the Sonoran Coralsnake has a very small head and mouth and is only prone to defending itself when handled. Most other snakes and lizards are also likely to bite in defense if handled but are considered non-venomous and therefore harmless to humans. **Wild animals should never be handled; it puts the handler at risk and is extremely stressful to the animal.**

RATTLESNAKES

There are fifteen species of rattlesnakes in our area. Those most often encountered are the Western Diamond-backed, Western, Mojave, Black-tailed, and Sidewinder. All of these snakes have rattles on their tails, and though many snakes vibrate their tails when nervous, only rattlesnakes can produce the characteristic buzzing noise so often heard in movies.

In the warm deserts, rattle- snakes are most active from March through October. In the spring they are active during daylight hours. As days become increasingly hot around early May, rattlesnakes become more active at night and spend the day in a spot of shade or a cool shelter. In addition to these periods of activity, rattlesnakes can be seen “basking” (lying out in the sun) during any month of the year.

Rattlesnakes do not dig their own holes: they utilize preexisting shelters. Shelter sites might be abandoned burrows of other animals, brush or woodpiles, rock crevices, or any tight place where a

snake can feel safe. Rattlesnakes may have several shelter sites within the range of their hunting grounds, and sometimes they will sleep in the open. All snakes are carnivorous (they eat animals). Rattlesnakes are effective predators eating rabbits, rodents, lizards, and birds. Snakes do not eat every day, and sometimes many months pass between meals.

Rattlesnakes are born alive, rather than hatching from eggs. At birth they are fully equipped with fangs and venom; miniature copies of their parents requiring no parental care. A baby rattlesnake is not born with a rattle on its tail; instead it has one little knob called a pre-button. Within days, the newborn sheds its skin, and as it grows, it generates a new segment of its rattle with each shed. The single button on a newborn’s tail does not produce a sound when rattled, but in about 3 weeks it will be fully capable of producing a warning rattle.

Newborn rattlesnakes are very small. They have no home territory and are low on the food chain (a lot of animals eat them). This makes for a very nervous little snake! In searching for something to eat and a place to live, newborn rattlesnakes turn up in the strangest places - swimming pools, potted plants, even in houses.

RATTLESNAKES AND YOUR COTTAGE

Watch your step!

Rattlesnake colors and patterns allow them to blend with their surroundings so they often seem invisible. It is always best to look where you place your feet and hands. A flashlight should be carried at night, especially on warm nights when rattlesnakes are very active. Around your home, keep walkways clear of brush, as rattlesnakes on open ground are more visible. Keep walkways brightly lit.

RATTLESNAKE ENCOUNTERS

Fortunately, when a rattlesnake is startled, usually its first defense is to warn you of its presence using its rattle. This encounter is always an exciting event. Though the inexperienced person may feel great fear, a little knowledge can turn one's emotions to feelings of respect and perhaps appreciation!

If you encounter a rattlesnake, keep in mind that once it senses you it will be just as nervous as you are. The snake has good reason to be afraid. By sheer size alone, you are much more of a threat to the snake than it is to you. Move slowly and deliberately when close to a rattlesnake and back away to a safe distance. Usually, the snake will either hold its ground or move away from you. The rattlesnake will not chase you. If the snake moves toward you, back away; it's probably just trying to get to a secure location just behind where you were standing. Keep tabs on the location of any rattlesnake and alert people in the area to be cautious. Pets should be restrained until the snake moves on.

Despite appearances, rattlesnakes do not crawl very fast. A rattle- snake traveling at top speed would have trouble reaching 3 mph. The strike speed, however, is impossible to match. The distance of the strike can be up to two-thirds the length of the snake. A distance equal to the length of the snake can be considered a safe distance; however, 6 feet is a better idea.

If you encounter a rattlesnake, please notify a Diamond Mountain staff member. Note the color, pattern and length of the snake.

Only people with proper equipment and training should handle rattlesnakes. No rattlesnake, not even a dead one, should be picked up by hand. Reflex bites with envenomation can occur for several hours after death.

If you're careful, the likelihood of a venomous snakebite occurring is low. If you avoid killing rattlesnakes you not only benefit the snake and the environment but also yourself. If rattlesnakes are left alone, the danger of being bitten is significantly reduced. Remember: more than half of all rattlesnake bites are provoked by the person bitten.

What to do if a rattlesnake bite

occurs:

- Note the color of the snake - brown or green. There are different anti-venoms depending upon the type of snake.
- Remain calm and reassure the victim.
- Remove all jewelry, watches, etc. from affected area.
- Immobilize extremity and keep at level below the heart.
- Decrease total body activity as is feasible.
- Move victim to medical facility without delay.

What NOT to do if a rattlesnake bite

occurs:

- Do NOT apply ice to bite area.
- Do NOT use incision of any kind.
- Do NOT use a constriction band or tourniquet.
- Do NOT administer alcohol or drugs.
- Do NOT use electric shock treatment.

GILA MONSTERS

Because they are brightly colored, slow moving and rarely encountered, Gila Monsters can hardly be considered dangerous to humans. They are, however, capable of defending themselves with a surprisingly swift venomous bite.

The Gila Monster primarily inhabits the deserts and foothills of the Southwest, ranging from southern Sonora, Mexico, north through the

deserts of Arizona, barely entering New Mexico, California, Nevada, and Utah.

The Gila Monster is the largest lizard in the United States, weighing up to 2 pounds and reaching a total length of 20 inches, including the large tail which is used for fat storage. They feed on animals that cannot easily escape, like newborn rodents, and on the eggs of reptiles and ground-nesting birds.

Gila Monsters spend most of their time underground. They over-winter in burrows and emerge in the spring, their most active season, to search for food and mates. With the onset of hot weather in late May or early June, they return to underground burrows. During the rainy season of late July and August, they become active again but are less frequently seen.

GILA MONSTERS AND YOUR COTTAGE

Many people enjoy seeing Gila Monsters. Watching your step, will improve your chances of avoiding a Gila Monster encounter.

GILA MONSTER ENCOUNTERS

The Gila Monster is venomous and caution should be used when one is seen. They should never be picked up or molested in any way; it puts one at risk and is in violation of state wildlife regulations.

The Gila Monster is a unique animal, inspiring myths and legends since early Americans first arrived in the Sonoran Desert. An encounter with a Gila Monster can be an exciting and positive event, although few are fortunate enough to see one in the wild.

If you encounter a Gila Monster, remember that you are much larger than it is; therefore, you pose a threat that will likely put it into a defensive mode. Stay out of its path and give it room, and it will likely continue on its way. If you encounter one in the yard, move away, alert

anyone in the vicinity, and restrain pets. If a Gila Monster is left alone for a couple of hours, it will likely move on. If it does not leave after several hours or even after a day, contact a Diamond Mountain staff member.

The Gila Monster's bite is a defensive measure. The teeth and venom cause considerable pain. It hangs on to whatever is bitten, working venom into the bite wound slowly through grooved lower teeth. Few bites to humans have been reported, and nearly all are the result of individuals handling or harassing the animal.

Because of their natural curiosity, small children and pets could put themselves at risk of being bitten by a Gila Monster; however, the Arizona Poison Center and Tucson veterinarians report that very few children or pets have ever been bitten. Nevertheless, parents and other caregivers should always exercise caution whenever small children are playing near wilderness areas. Children should be taught about dangerous desert animals and how to avoid risky interactions with them.

What to do if a Gila Monster bite occurs:

- Remain calm.
- Quickly remove the Gila Monster using an object to pry jaws open. Keep away from the animal after you have dislodged it.
- Transport bitten individual to medical facility immediately.
- Remove jewelry, watches, and restrictive clothing from affected limb.
- Immobilize limb below heart level.

What NOT to do if a Gila Monster bite occurs:

- Do NOT apply ice to the bite area.
- Do NOT make an incision of any kind.
- Do NOT use a constriction bandage or a tourniquet.
- Do NOT administer alcohol or drugs.

- Do NOT use electric shock treatment.



Gila Monster **VENOMOUS** This slow moving lizard should not be considered dangerous unless handled or molested.

rattle.



Sonoran Coralsnake **VENOMOUS** This small shy snake should not be considered dangerous unless handled.



Western Diamond-backed Rattlesnake **VENOMOUS** All rattlesnakes have a blunt tail and at least one segment of a rattle.



Gophersnake **HARMLESS** Similar pattern to a rattlesnake but the tail comes to a sharp point with no rattle.



Green Mohave Rattlesnake **VENOMOUS** All rattlesnakes have a blunt tail and at least one segment of a