

RATTLES SNAKES ARE OUT

A sure sign of spring-with fangs

Doug Kreutz

Sure signs of spring in the desert: balmy weather, nesting birds, budding mesquite trees and - be warned:

Rattlesnakes.

They're out - and they're biting.

"We've already had five people treated for rattlesnake bites" this year in the Tucson area, said Keith Boesen, director of the Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center. None of the bites was fatal.

Rattlers, which generally are inactive from November to March, apparently came out early this year, said Randy Babb, a biologist with the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

"I've seen a few myself, and people working at our wildlife areas are seeing lots of rattlesnakes," Babb said. "It's been so warm in late winter and early spring, we figure we're about a month ahead in terms of snake activity this year."

It's a good time, then, to brush up on rattlesnake behavior, safety strategies and what to do if you suffer a bite.

RATTLERS 101

Babb, Boesen and reference sources provided a short course for this and the accompanying sections. Some of the highlights:

- Southern Arizona is home to nine or 10 species of rattlesnakes, depending on how one defines the region.
- It's possible to encounter one on any warm day of the year even though they're usually inactive during the winter months.
- When rattlers come out of their dens in the spring, they sometimes slither many miles to their summering grounds.
- Their peak daytime activity comes in the warm months of spring and in September and October. They're often out at night in the hot summer season.

ABOUT THOSE BITES

- Western diamond rattlesnakes, a large species that can deliver a big dose of venom, account for most of the bites in Southern Arizona.
- Between 150 and 200 snakebites are reported to the Poison and Drug Information Center in a typical year.
- Only a very small percentage of victims die as a result of bites. In a recent 10-year period, poison centers reported 1,912 bites - leading to only four deaths. The most recent confirmed snakebite death in Southern



This Western diamondback rattler makes its home at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum. Five persons have been bitten this year. MAMTA POPAT / ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Arizona was in 2005.

- Prompt treatment at a medical facility with antivenin is a main reason for the high survival rate. Another is that an estimated 10 percent or more of rattler strikes are "dry bites," which deliver no venom.
- Rattlesnakes sometimes coil and rattle before striking - but not always. People have been bitten by snakes that didn't sound a rattling warning.

STAYING SAFE

- A "golden rule" for avoiding snake bite is to watch where you put your hands and feet.
- Simply put: Don't mess with snakes. More than half the bites reported to the Poison and Drug Information Center involved people who saw a snake, recognized the danger, and still chose to approach the snake.
- Don't even mess with a dead or decapitated snake. The head can still deliver a venomous bite minutes after death by a sort of reflex reaction.
- If you see a snake, step back slowly and move a safe distance away.
- If you are bit, go immediately to a medical facility. Don't use a tourniquet or make incisions around the bite because you're likely to do more harm than good. Don't try to capture or kill the snake for identification. It's dangerous and not necessary because all rattler bites are treated with the same antivenin.

SNAKE REMOVAL

Some fire departments will remove rattlers from a house or confined yard. Call the department covering your area for details on snake-removal services.

INFORMATION

Call 1-800-222-1222 anytime for information on snakebites. The line is operated by the Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center at the University of Arizona College of Pharmacy.

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