

DANGER!



My husband and I went walking the other day, another spectacular day in the Big Bend country. As we headed out on our hike I warned my husband to keep his eyes open, it was a particularly beautiful day for encountering one of our least favorite neighbors, the rattlesnake. They like temperatures in the same range that we do, around 75°F, give or take a few degrees. They also like sunlight after a cool morning; it helps them warm up for the day. We walked along the middle of a rocky ranch road, looking at the ground often while enjoying the singing of the birds.

At one point I saw a beautiful acacia in full bloom and moved closer to see which of the many desert acacias it was. Yes, I looked under the bush before getting very close, no, there was no rattlesnake. There was one close by however, and it began rattling loudly before I got within 10 feet of it. I appreciated the rattled warning so I did not disturb the snake any further but moved away, letting it calm down. It probably calmed down before I did!

It is the rattle that makes the rattlesnake so interesting to people (and it is the bite that makes the rattlesnake a feared member of our environment). The Papago people of Arizona tell an interesting story about the origin of the rattle. When Elder Brother first created the animals, to each he gave something unique: the beaver received a flat tail, the coyote was given cunning, to the pronghorn was given fleetness. The rattlesnake was given his rattle by Elder Brother as

something he could entertain himself with. When other animals were around they would ask the rattlesnake to rattle for them because they liked the sound. Sometimes the snake would be asleep and someone would come by and say, "Hey, rattle me a tune." And the snake would wake up and rattle until the intruder would go away. This happened so often the snake was exhausted and got so he hated the rattle. One day Elder Brother took pity on the poor snake and gave him two mesquite thorns for teeth, saying that the next time the snake should bite anyone who awakened him. This tale ends with admonition that rattlers only bite those who are awakening them. The rattlesnake has evolved quite a bit from a peaceful animal with the mesquite-thorn defense. And, speaking from experience, the rattlesnake may be wide awake when it bites what it perceives as an intruder, whether it rattles its tail or not.

Undoubtedly the most distinguishing feature of the rattlesnake is its rattle and, although vipers are found throughout most of the world, the rattlesnake (also a viper) is only found in the Western Hemisphere. While many snakes actually vibrate their tails, only the rattlesnake, with its curious appendage, has the ability to produce such a nerve-shattering sound.

When the early Europeans first encountered the rattlesnake they were bewildered and more than a little cautious. There were all kinds of rumors about this unusual serpent. One of the more interesting was that the rattle was actually more dangerous than the fangs, that when it was shaken a poisonous dust pervaded the atmosphere and killed all who inhaled it. That idea didn't last very long, but it did emphasize a lack of knowledge. Other theories about the rattle included the idea that each rattle on a snake's tail represented a person killed or that the rattle was intended to calm and soothe the creatures of the forest, plains, and desert. My favorite Native American myth is that the snake rattles when it is having a nightmare and, if awakened, it will bite. I think that is in keeping with the Papago story.

The true purpose of the rattle is a source of speculation. Not long ago people thought it functioned as a mating call, attracting members of the opposite sex. Herpetologists (scientists who study reptiles) have studied countless mating pairs of snakes and never heard them rattle before, during, or after the fact. Another idea maintained that the rattle summoned other snakes to the rescue when one was threatened. Again, countless experiences with angry, rattling rattlesnakes proved that seldom if ever are other snakes seen. Besides, all snakes are deaf. True they react to some "sounds" but these are only reactions to the vibrations that are felt by the body of the snake. It is quite logical to assume that no snake has heard another snake rattle.

Another idea promoted by some is that the rattle is used to charm its prey, the sound does cause most animals to freeze in position but in watching rattlesnakes catching their prey, the rattle is not used at all. One respected biologist posited that the rattle had the appearance of a grasshopper and was used to attract prey. He supported this idea by the fact that he was almost bitten when he tried to catch the grasshopper. While many people find this thought amusing and somewhat crazy I don't laugh. I was almost bitten when I thought the rattle was a scorpion and I almost stepped on it (it was evening and no, the snake did not rattle!). Yet another hypothesis states that the rattle is used to warn its prey that it is approaching danger and that it should run away. This idea defies logic. The snake would then starve to death and there would be no more rattlesnakes. No, not even close. In some areas of North America, rattlesnakes are the most common snake.

Anyone who has spent much time in rattlesnake country realizes that the snake does use the rattle as a warning, not to prey and not to protect the intruder. It is a threat intended to drive away any creature that might harm the snake. Most other animals will retreat upon hearing the rattle. With man, this threat often causes a different reaction. Most people think that not only is the snake threatening them but is a menace to anyone else that comes by. Given an opportunity, most people will kill the rattling snake.

We did not kill the snake that rattled at us from the distance of 10 feet. It was not endangering us and we considered it a good snake since it warned us to keep away. Snakes, even rattlesnakes are an important component of our ecosystems and to remove one does damage to that ecosystem. I speak from a curious position: I have been bitten twice by rattlesnakes. Once because I wasn't paying attention and put my hand on a rock rattler and once when I was opening the door to my house and a rattlesnake bit me on the leg while it tried to hide under the door jam. I did not kill the first snake. The second snake I not only killed, I literally blew it away with 8 shots even though the first shot killed it. No one comes to my house, bites me and lives to tell about it!

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