

# Coexisting With Rattlesnakes

From Erick Briggs - Natural Solutions - 760.464.6792

Spring and summer are typically rattlesnake season (in Southern California this could be all year or any time the temp. consistently approaches 70-75 degrees Fahrenheit). You and your dogs are particularly at risk if you live in areas where there is a significant amount of brush nearby. But the danger is minimal if you understand (1) how to keep rattlesnakes out of your yard, and (2) what to do if you encounter one.

## HOW TO IDENTIFY A RATTLER, AND WHAT TO EXPECT

Rattlesnakes are easily identifiable by their broad, triangular heads, thin narrow necks, relatively heavy bodies, and often a rattle at the end of their blunt tail (note: often the rattle may be damaged and therefore absent, and newborn rattlesnakes may not have developed a rattle yet making identification difficult at times). Babies can be just as dangerous as the adults. Rattlesnakes should not be confused with harmless snakes such as the beneficial gopher snake (both tend to have similar blotch like patterns). Unless provoked or cornered, rattlesnakes will only intentionally strike animals small enough to be eaten, such as rodents, lizards, and small birds. Rattlesnakes are terrified by humans and dogs (mainly due to our size) and would rather run than have a confrontation if possible. Like all snakes, the body temperature of the rattlesnake depends on the air or ground temperature around it, so you would be more likely to encounter a rattlesnake in the open during the warmer hours of a spring or fall day and the cooler hours (morning or evening) during the hot summers.

## PROTECTING YOURSELF AND YOURS

Rattlesnakes come into residential areas for two reasons: food and shelter. Therefore you should:

1. Eliminate the food attraction (rodents) by (a) keeping your yard free of places where rodents might nest, such as wood and/or trash piles, (b) plugging all ground openings such as rodent holes, (c) using only covered trash containers, (d) eliminating other rodent attractants such as bird feeders and unpicked or fallen fruit from fruit bearing trees.
2. Eliminate the cover attraction by (a) making sure there are several inches of ground clearance under shrubs (b) avoid tall ground covering (cut lawn and remove weeds), (c) if you live in an elevated house or trailer, try to eliminate access to the crawl space below your house and any adjacent structures, such as a porch or deck, (d) move or remove hiding places such as large rocks or rubbish, especially if your property is near undeveloped natural area, such as a canyon, or hillside. If so you may want to clear a bare strip of 30 to 100ft at your property line, or thin out and cut back shrubs so that sunlight can better filter through and you gain a better chance of recognizing a rattlesnake if present.
3. If necessary to protect children and pets, a "snake proof" fence can be constructed. Use a 36 inch tall piece of heavy 1/4-inch galvanized screen. Bury the lower edge a few inches below the dirt and slant the fence outward at about 30-degree angle from top to bottom. The ground outside should be kept free from tall plants and debris, as this acts like a ladder allowing the snakes access over the fence.
4. Educate yourself and your family about the wildlife in your area, in particular anything that may pose a threat to the health to you, your family, or your pets. For you and your family, you may want to use your local resources, such as a computer, a library, or a local animal park or nature station. For your pets they can be "Snake Trained" to better ensure their safety.

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## FOR HIKERS

Be prepared, if you go hiking in brush, by (1) wearing loose trousers over boots or shoes that extend over your ankle, (2) always look before you step or place anything on the ground or on a structure such as a rock (this includes your hands, your pack or water, and even before you sit anywhere), (3) educate yourself and be aware of any potential wildlife that could cause harm in the environment you are hiking in, (4) if possible never hike alone and NEVER hike without a cellular phone. And if you do happen upon a rattlesnake, simply go around it and keep a safe distance of at least 6 feet. Do not attempt to move or kill a rattlesnake in the wild, you will greatly increase your risk of a painful if not fatal snake bite!

## IF THE WORST HAPPENS

If you see a rattlesnake on your property, call your local animal control agency. If a human is bitten by a rattlesnake immediately get to a location where you can dial 911 so the victim can be rushed to the hospital as soon as possible. Do note, that cutting the skin of a bit, attempting to suck out the poison, or applying a tourniquet, is useless and is usually just adding insult to injury. If a pet is bitten simply get it to an emergency veterinary facility as quickly as possible for treatment. Do remember: Stay calm, call for assistance and keep in mind that rattlesnake venom is of such nature as to usually allow ample time for successful medical treatment.