



All About Rattlesnakes -- Part 1
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Here in El Dorado County, we have only one species of rattlesnake, the Northern Pacific Rattlesnake. The following is important information not everyone knows about this important resident of our area.

Dark brown, olive, gray, reddish brown, yellowish or tan, the rattlesnake blends in with its surrounding environment. Large, dark blotches with dark edges and light borders mark its back, with corresponding blotches along each side. There are well-defined rings on the lower end of its tail above the rattles. A light stripe extends diagonally from the eye to the corner of the mouth. Although most are 3-4 feet long, they can grow up to 5 feet long.

Rattlesnakes prefer rocky slopes and outcroppings and rocky areas in grasslands, woodlands, and forests. Although primarily nocturnal, they can be active at dawn and dusk during periods of excessive daytime heat, and during the day when temperatures are less intense. In cold-winter areas, they remain in their dens in burrows, caves, and rock crevices.

Females begin bearing young at about three years of age and breed annually thereafter, giving live birth to 8 to 15 young between August and November. Baby rattlesnakes emerge fully formed, ready to hunt and defend themselves. They sport bright yellow tails but no rattles -- just a single button which makes no sound. As they age, they grow rattles and lose the yellow color.

Rattlesnakes shed their skins up to three times a year, adding a new segment to their rattles each time. But they also break or lose some rattles, so the number of rattles on a rattlesnake's tail does not accurately reveal a rattlesnake's age.

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Rattlesnakes are pit vipers, meaning they possess a heat-sensing pit on each side of their head, used to detect warm-blooded prey. They don't see color, but they see thermal heat emanating from animals and can detect differences in temperature down to a fraction of a degree!

Rattlesnakes eat birds, lizards, snakes, frogs, insects, and small mammals. They locate prey while moving around and lie in wait near their trails. They strike at and release passing prey, and then follow the envenomated animal's trail and swallow it whole.

When alarmed, a rattlesnake often shakes its tail, producing the iconic rattling sound, which is intended to warn enemies of its presence. But they do not always rattle -- sometimes they remain silent when sensing a threat, hiding by blending into the surrounding environment. A common cultural image involves a coiled rattlesnake, its tail rattling loudly, and its head raised and ready to strike, but rattlesnakes can strike from any position. Coiling warns other creatures to stay back, a defensive behavior they use when crawling away would put them in danger of attack. A rattlesnake will defend itself from perceived threats, but given the opportunity, it will usually avoid confrontation.

"Rattlesnakes are among the most reasonable forms of dangerous wildlife: their first line of defense is to remain motionless; if you surprise them or cut off their retreat, they offer an audio warning; if you get too close, they head for cover. Venom is intended for prey, so they're reluctant to bite." Leslie Anthony. *Snakebit: Confessions of a Herpetologist*. Greystone Books, 2008.

Rattlesnakes are a fascinating and valuable part of our local ecosystems, as predators that keep disease-carrying animals under control. Also, their venom is used in a variety of vital medical applications. But their populations are dwindling due to lack of knowledge about their roles and habits. Be sure to read the second article in this series in next week's Mountain Democrat, for vital information about how to live safely in harmony with our rattlesnakes. You can also find a University of California IPM Pest note at:

<http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn74119.html>

Master Gardeners continue to offer gardening classes on-line. Upcoming sessions include a live question-and-answer event (October 21) and classes on Putting Your Vineyard and Garden to Bed (October 31), Growing Succulents (November 4) and Shade Gardening (November 7 and 14). Please go to http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Public_Education_Classes/ for registration instructions and to see all upcoming online classes.

Due to the pandemic, Master Gardener events will for the foreseeable future continue to be limited. Please see our calendar of events for learning opportunities. We realize our public classes are valued by county residents and we are doing our best to provide virtual learning opportunities.

The Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, is open to the public, from 9 AM to noon on Fridays and Saturdays through October 31. State and county public health guidelines require us to limit visitors to ten at a time (including our docents) and

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ask that they practice social distancing and wear face coverings. Restrooms will not be open. Check http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden for more information.

Have a gardening question? Master Gardeners are working hard remotely and can still answer your questions. Leave a message on our office telephone: 530-621-5512, or use the “Ask a Master Gardener” option on our website: mgeldorado.ucanr.edu. We’ll get back to you! Master Gardeners are also on Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news.