

In my backyard: Sharper than a serpent's tooth

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

I am not a great fan of snakes, but even I have to admit that they are fascinating creatures.

A couple of years ago in late spring when the weather was still cool but the sun was hot in the afternoon, I gazed out into my backyard at the flagstone patio outside my kitchen window. Thinking that I might need to get the weed-eater out soon, I noticed that the dogs had dragged the garden hose up onto the patio. But, doing a double-take, I realized with a fair amount of panic (due no doubt to my older brother terrorizing me with an assortment of hinged, wooden Mexican novelty snakes and snake carcasses) that the



By Clinton & Charlei Robertson from Del Rio, Texas & College Station, TX, USA - Western Diamondback Rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*), CC BY 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2380272>

“hose” was a snake sunning itself right there in broad daylight! It was ignoring the dogs and they seemed not to have noticed it, anyway they were walking around it, probably hoping I would come out to entertain them. I yelled at my wife and ran out the backdoor to confront the wily serpent.

As I approached, the snake was sprawled in a loose, S-shape. It didn't move a muscle, obviously sluggish from the cool day and trying to warm itself up. I reached over to a hoe leaning against the house and decided to drop the hoe flat down on its head, rather than chopping it to pieces. One blow should do it, and as I raised the hoe to deliver the deathblow, to my horror the snake lunged forward in a lightning-fast movement, straight for my feet. In my corpulent version of the standing broad jump I leaped into the air and in the same movement began pounding at the hapless reptile, who seemed now to be slithering for its life. I dispatched the snake in short order (I am sure herpers are horrified and disgusted by now) and began to examine my trophy. I am no snake aficionado but I recognized the intruder as a Western Diamondback, not the most potent of rattlers but still a dangerous creature I didn't care to have the run of my backyard.

The diamondback rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*) is common here, but only one of four or five rattlesnake species in the Trans-Pecos area. The diamond pattern on its back is a dead give-away, although there are other non-poisonous species with similar markings that can give one a start if you are prone to snake panic (and I am.) Bull snakes and certain rat snakes have similar coloration, and have the habit of vibrating their tail when alarmed. In dry leaves that vibration can sound a lot like a rattlesnake. So, there are cases of mistaken identity.

Diamondback habitats are wide-ranging, from desert to grassland to rolling plains, scrub oak and juniper forest, rocky canyons and outcroppings to thorn scrub. We have all of that, so Terrell County suits them well.

They are found in the Southwest and Mexico, generally at or below 5,000 feet in elevation, although some populations in San Luis Potosí, Mexico are found as high as the 8,000 foot level.

The snakes usually come out of hibernation the first part of March (or earlier in warm years) and have been found active clear into December. Cold-blooded diamondbacks rely on the environment to get their warmth. During the hottest part of the summer they retreat to cooler spots to escape overheating in the mid-day sun.

During the winter, diamondbacks “hole up” in dens in outcroppings of rocks or small caves, sometimes with many snakes in one den. This enables the male to “hook up” with an eligible female as they leave the den in the spring.

The size of diamondbacks is often the subject of a great deal of fantasy in West Texas. When I was a kid a story hit the El Paso newspaper of a rattlesnake that was twenty feet long! It was not a live snake that was found, but a snake hide, located in a New Mexico shack in the wilderness. Conjecture was that the head alone would have been the size of a car steering wheel! Further investigation revealed that it was a python hide, not a rattlesnake hide.

No, there are no giant diamondbacks roaming the wilderness, although the current record is just shy of eight feet in length. Normally, diamondbacks are in the three- to four-foot range.

Diamondbacks can show a range of colors; beige, brown, gray, red, pink and yellow examples have been found. Pink rattlesnakes are found in the Chisos of Big Bend National Park. Again, as a kid, we were on our way to Big Bend on a fishing trip and killed a greenish-colored diamondback coming out of a Johnson grass field by the highway. My dad was so impressed, he skinned it and mounted it to a board, rattles and all, for display in his café at Marathon. After he sold out, the rattlesnake hide came home and was proudly mounted in *my* bedroom. Imagine going to sleep every night looking at that thing!

In romantic matters, the male finds a receptive female and tenderly flicks his tongue over her back. He begins a back and forth movement of his head, almost a dance, to woo the female. If she rejects his advances, she does so by shoving him away. Success brings about birth in the fall of up to twenty-five live-born babies (Sorry, kids, no rattlesnake eggs.) The young immediately move off into the environment to start their new lives. Baby rattlesnake venom is *not* more potent than adult venom. It is all the same venom, and quite potent, but the babies cannot deliver a big dose, due to their size.

Occasionally, two males will go into ritual combat to woo a female, who sits nearby judging the duel. They rise up and wrap their upper bodies around each other, and the first to wrestle the other to the ground is the winner. The winner gets the lady.

Diamondbacks feed on small mammals; mice, rats and cottontail rabbits, as well as chipmunks, and squirrels. They will actively hunt for prey, but will also lie in ambush by a well-used game trail.

Snake rattles are made of chiton, the same substance as your hair and fingernails. A rattle is added every time the snake sheds its skin. If a snake molts more than once per year (and they can,) counting rattles is not a reliable way to judge the age.

Rattlesnakes are valuable in the environment to keep rodent populations in check. Seeing that rats, mice and kangaroo rats in our area are known to carry the black plague and the Hantavirus, it might not be a good idea to kill every rattlesnake that you see. (Did I redeem myself, herpers?)

However, when my next door neighbor, a trapper, brought home a rattlesnake to show his kids, he turned it loose in the flowerbed, afterwards. You can be sure that if I had come across that snake in my yard, it would have been dispatched with extreme prejudice, and the trapper might have had to stay in the country for a while to escape the same!

And, what's in your backyard?