

NEWS FROM THE PIT

Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center



Rattlesnake Season is Here--A Timeline and Tips

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Spring is rapidly approaching.

For many Arizona residents, the Spring season brings more than warmer days and a reminder to clean out old junk, it also means rattlesnakes are coming out of hibernation. The chain of events we will describe is based on surveys of wild snakes, natural history accounts, trends drawn from thousands of rattlesnake removal service calls, and 25 years' worth of data compiled from calls to the Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center. Unfortunately, our summary can't predict every single Arizona rattlesnake that will be encountered in 2025. Please consider this information as general guidance on what the average Arizona resident should expect to see, and what they can do to stay safe.

NEWSLETTER HIGHLIGHTS

Rattlesnake behavior during rattlesnake season and ways to keep yourself safe.

Image 1: Western Diamondback Rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*)

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The year's first rattlesnake encounters.

Starting in January, a handful of rattlesnakes are spotted every year. These are usually encountered at home on a typical winter day, found in the garage or underneath something (furniture, siding, plants, etc.) close to the house. Although, hikers are also sometimes surprised by an unexpected encounter out on a trail. Overall rattlesnake encounters are few in the cool months, but still entirely normal. The idea that a hibernating animal just goes to sleep in a cave for months without moving is perhaps more inspired by cartoons than reality. Hibernating rattlesnakes still make small movements, even occasionally emerging from their winter homes for a short time. The most frequent and dependable cause for them to leave the house, so to speak, is an opportunity to drink some water. During the winter months, when there is typically little to no precipitation, a bit of rainfall can cause a sudden spike in the number of encounters.

Getting ready to roll out: staging and early egress.

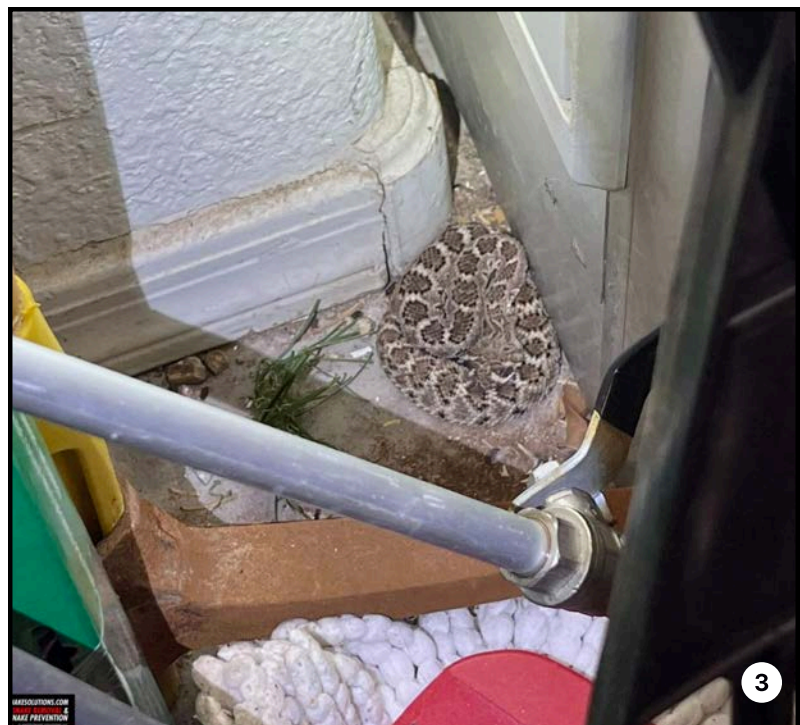
In February, rattlesnakes begin to make movements prior to leaving the den. This typically means moving to locations closer to the entrance and spending at least some time basking near the surface. This means that any rattlesnakes spending the prior months tucked away in the garage under a box or inside your favorite grill island, may now move to be near the garage door or under a nearby bush. This activity is notable because encountering a rattlesnake at home in February typically means it has been there for months without being noticed, and it probably isn't alone. As February turns into March, this behavior increases with rattlesnakes spending more time staged at spots very near the den, basking and getting ready for what comes next. Encounters tend to occur at the warmest time of day but can happen any time because these snakes are typically discovered or uncovered, rather than seen on the move.



WESTERN DIAMONDBACK RATTLESNAKE
Crotalus atrox MARICOPA COUNTY, ARIZONA 2024 © BRYAN D. HUGHES, RATTLESNAKE SOLUTIONS LLC
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Image 2: A Western Diamondback Rattlesnake rests just outside of its winter den.

Image 3: A Western Diamondback Rattlesnake resting in the corner of a garage where it had spent the winter. As the days begin to warm, its position has changed to be more visible.



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SAFE PREVENTION

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The Spring social – a lot to do in little time.

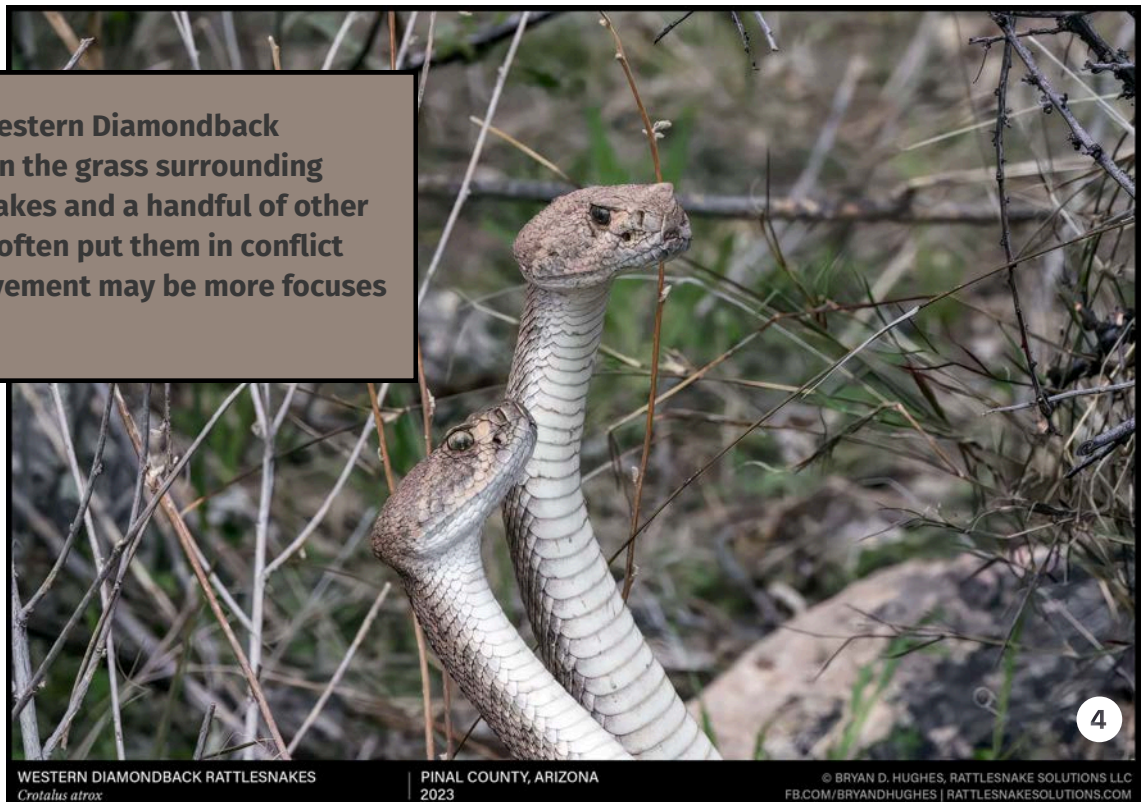
Rattlesnake behavior during the Spring season is strongly driven by social matters. This includes dominance and territorial disputes, courtship, and the first mating period of the year. Females may bask in small groups, with males continually pushing each other out of the best spots ... often literally. Rattlesnakes will make longer journeys away from their winter homes, influencing the likelihood and location of encountering humans. As long as the nighttime temperatures remain cool, dipping below 50°F, much of this behavior remains subtle. Encounters are directly tied to a den that is being returned to each night and many of the snakes that are seen are actively in motion rather than basking. By the second week of March, rattlesnake encounters between 2-4pm become the most common, although random morning sightings still happen, and the last snakes discovered hibernating in garages are found.

Rattlesnake activity is increasing by this time but overall, it's still relatively quiet. However, things are about to change very quickly.

Warm nights in Spring.

After thousands of snake removal calls a notable trend has emerged. Warm nights will mean that the snakes which have been tethered to their dens are now free to leave. The indicator for this is not warm days, but rather warm nights. Once overnight temperatures in March stabilize into 4 or 5 consecutive days in the low 60°F range, it's go time! The risk of freezing is over, and rattlesnakes begin a race to get ready for the brutal heat of summer. When they do, mating season is in full swing, and rattlesnake encounters skyrocket to peak frequency seemingly overnight. This is what can be referred to as the start of "rattlesnake season". While it is true that a rattlesnake can be seen on any day of the year in Arizona, the odds of an encounter during this period are multitudes higher.

Image 4: A pair of male Western Diamondback Rattlesnakes in combat. In the grass surrounding them are female rattlesnakes and a handful of other males. This behavior can often put them in conflict with humans as their movement may be more focused on social behavior.



WESTERN DIAMONDBACK RATTLESNAKES
Crotalus atrox

PINAL COUNTY, ARIZONA
2023

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Rattlesnake prime time.

In March and early April, male rattlesnakes make up the bulk of rattlesnake relocation service calls, with good reason. Mating behavior likely accounts for most encounters at homes. The presence of a female rattlesnake can result in multiple males looking for her. They are drawn in after picking up her scent even if the den is nowhere near the property. A male in active tracking mode makes large, arcing loops, smelling the ground and correcting course enroute. If he loses the scent, he simply loops around to a place where it was stronger and tries again. A male rattlesnake in this tracking pattern may seem somewhat oblivious to the outside world. They seem to be easier to startle unexpectedly and if disturbed they only pause briefly before resuming. These tracking males cover large distances and may spend hours moving out in the open. They will cross over roads, driveways, crisscross backyards, and can be found just about anywhere during this time. They also tend to rapidly rattle at greater distances, often without any prompting from the observer. They are most detectable at this time and often found in unexpected places. Female rattlesnakes are still encountered, of course, but they tend to be found at rest or basking rather than crawling. The presence of a female at this time of year, however, can often indicate the presence of other females. If a female rattlesnake is found on a snake relocation service call, it should trigger a search for other females, and the males that are likely looking for her.

In addition to mating, rattlesnakes need to eat and drink.

After a long winter without food and only the occasional opportunity to drink, a good meal is necessary. Rattlesnakes will track rodents and birds to find ambush points along trails. Then they wait ... and if nothing happens, they wait some more. These hunting locations may not only be based on a scent left by a rodent, but previous success in the area. Places where rodents or birds are common will produce more rattlesnake encounters. This can mean the backyard birdbath, seed block, woodpiles, or anywhere that attracts rodents. Encounters start to occur in the late morning around 10 AM to noon. However, removal calls tend to abruptly increase between 3 PM and 6 PM.



WESTERN DIAMONDBACK RATTLESNAKES (MATING) | YAVAPAI COUNTY, ARIZONA
Crotalus atrox | APRIL 2020 | © BRIAN D. HUGHES, RATTLESNAKE SOLUTIONS LLC
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Image 5: Female rattlesnakes during the spring often have at least one male associated with them; either mating as seen here or active tracking for courtship.

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An encounter takes two.

Springtime rattlesnake encounters aren't just the result of snakes being active. Those 80°F days and reasonable nights are the reason many people live in Arizona.

Outdoor activities like hiking and gardening put people and snakes in the same place simultaneously. Just as a spike in rattlesnake activity is happening, humans also swarm trails and parks. It's worth noting that the spike in male rattlesnakes on the move is right around when school gets out for the day. For anyone with grade school kids, it's a good time to talk about rattlesnakes and avoid situations that could result in an encounter.

Preparing for hard times and a last burst of activity.

This hunting and mating activity will remain high through April and much of May. But the heat is coming and nobody, including rattlesnakes, is happy about it. As daytime temperatures reach triple digits and overnight lows stay in the 70s, rattlesnake encounters will start to be more aligned with crepuscular (during twilight hours) activity. Expect peaks in activity in the morning until around 11 am, then again in the late afternoon. This activity will continue through the first few hours after dark, though encounters are fewer. More encounters will be caused by dogs being let out to go to the bathroom for the night. By the end of May, rattlesnakes will be working on being hidden away again. This behavior, called aestivation, keeps them out of lethal temperatures and helps avoid desiccation. As this happens, they'll again make larger movements to locations that meet specific requirements to survive the summer heat. And with that, the arc of spring rattlesnake season ends.



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Things to do and remember during the start of rattlesnake season.

- **Maintain your situational awareness.**

When working or playing outside, keep hands and feet in places with good visibility. Keep a close eye on kids playing outdoors, especially those that border natural areas. Stay on trails and avoid rocky outcrops if you are hiking. Always keep dogs on leashes.

- **Talk to kids about rattlesnakes.**

Not to instill fear, but to remind them to avoid situations we have described, and to remind them to leave rattlesnakes alone if they see one.

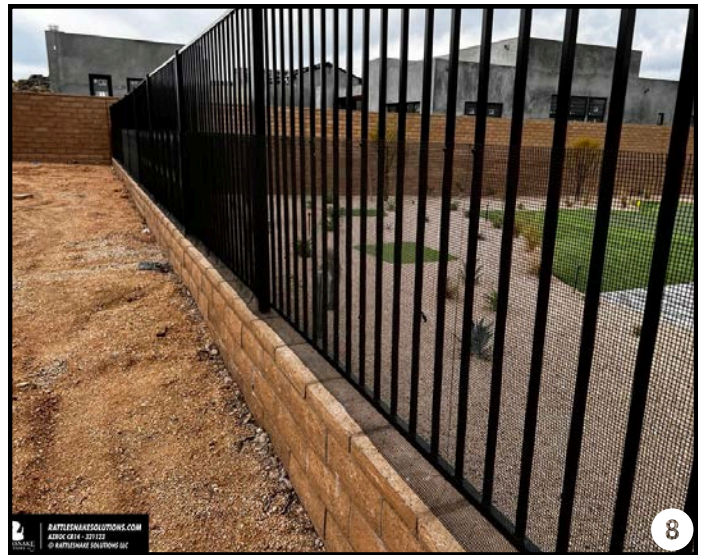
- **Homeowners can prepare.**

Cleanup that yard! Remove rattlesnake hiding spots like landscaping debris, leaf litter, lumber, construction materials, and low groundcover plants (lantana & rosemary). You can also get rid of things that attract rattlesnake prey such as bird feeders. If you want it to stay, consider moving it to a new location once a year because even moving it 20 feet down the fence can disrupt the process of someplace becoming an ideal rattlesnake hiding spot. If your backyard has an existing fence and gates, you can also consider snake fencing.

- **If you see a rattlesnake, just leave it alone.**

They're not aggressive and won't come after you. By the time you see a rattlesnake, if you're not standing on it, the danger is over unless you choose to change that fact.

- **If a bite occurs, call 911 and follow instructions.**



Images 7 & 8: Pavers and construction material, especially when stored for more than a year, can make great homes for hibernating rattlesnakes. Rattlesnake fencing is a method to physically prevent rattlesnakes from entering a protected area.