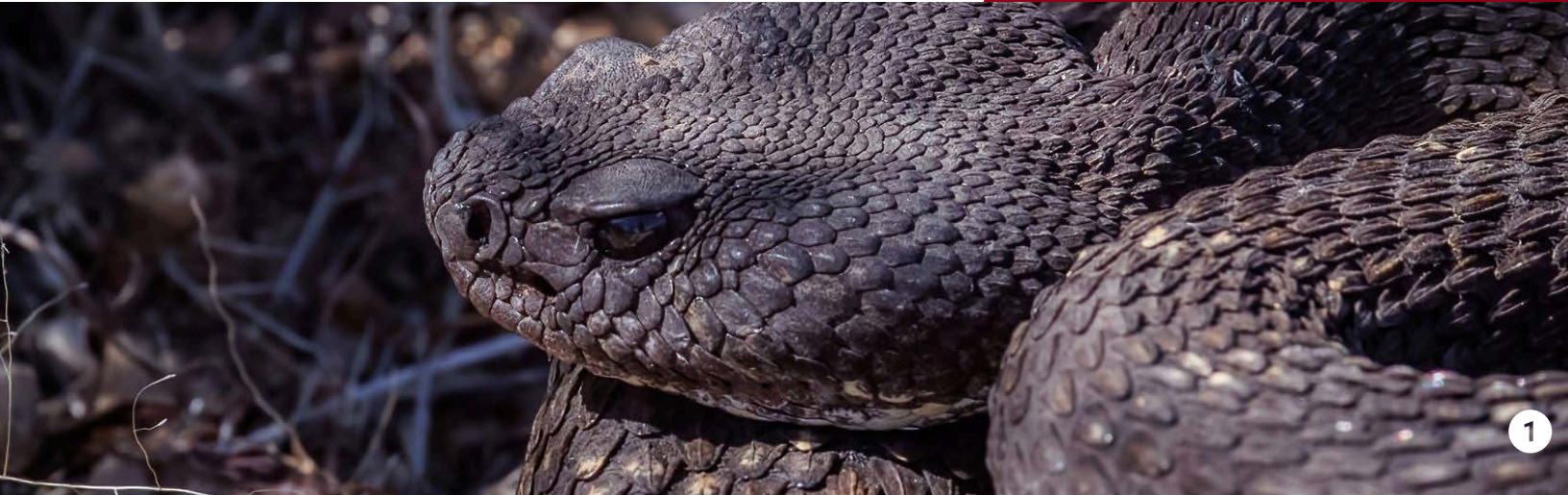


NEWS FROM THE PIT

Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center



As Temperatures Cool, Rattlesnake Activity Heats Up: Fall Safety Tips

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Temperatures are finally coming down and the air in the morning has just a little hint of cool to come. And, being from Arizona, we're all pretty excited about that. Not just people but wildlife as well, including rattlesnakes. We are about to enter one of the periods with the most random rattlesnake encounters.

What is predictable, however, is that these random encounters tend to follow an observable timeline. By evaluating the activity of an active snake removal service over time, a general timeline can be assumed. Here's a summary of what rattlesnakes will do this fall, why they do it, and how you can avoid an unexpected encounter. Note: This applies to areas of Arizona south of the rim. In other locations, timing and behavior will differ.

NEWSLETTER HIGHLIGHTS

Rattlesnake activity during the fall season and precautions to take to prevent a bite.

Image 1: Arizona Black Rattlesnake (*Crotalus cerberus*), photo courtesy of Rattlesnake Solutions

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“Why are rattlesnakes more active in the fall? I thought they loved heat.”

While temperatures were lethally hot in this record-breaking year, rattlesnakes were doing about the same thing we were: hiding. They spend a lot of time in one location, tucked away, only coming out at night to move short distances. The locations that snakes choose to hide away are very specific, which means that rattlesnake encounter situations can be very predictable during much of the summer.

But now that nights are cool and daytime reasonable, they are not as restrained by temperature. They can spend more time on the surface, out in the open, and on the crawl, and often at the same time that humans are. Just as we may feel relieved to again be able to spend an afternoon on trails or in the yard without the deadly Arizona sun, rattlesnakes and other wildlife are on the move.



They have a lot to do before winter sets in. Rattlesnakes need to get any last meals, find water, and become as physically capable as possible to survive the inactive winter months. This can mean frequent movements and time spent in the open in ambush during the daytime. Baby snakes and those who have not had the most successful year may be desperate to find prey, leading to activity beyond what may be expected with other rattlesnakes.



Fall is also a mating time for many rattlesnakes. As female rattlesnakes are once again available to breed, males may make large movements searching for them. While in this state of tracking a potential mate, male rattlesnakes often make large loops, moving relatively quickly with intent. These snakes may be more easily startled than one at rest and can be found relatively far from what may be considered ideal habitat.

This all means rattlesnakes are moving in less predictable locations, regardless of the presence of attracting factors. Random encounters with rattlesnakes of all age classes are highest during the fall.

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Baby rattlesnakes can be just about anywhere in the fall.

In addition to the adult rattlesnakes who may have just given birth and need to move and eat, many baby rattlesnakes are trying to score their first meal. These newborns have much to accomplish during their first couple of months. They must find prey, succeed in hunting, and establish the beginning of their home range.

While this may be informed by scent and interaction with other rattlesnakes, these little ones are on their own. As a result, they often show up in unexpected places, and being under a foot long, these tiny snakes can be easily missed.

During this time, many of them are eaten by predators, fail to find food in time, pick bad locations for hibernation, are killed by cars or the sun, and countless other threats. Many will not survive until the next year, meaning that at this time of year, there is the highest number of rattlesnakes out there in any given year.

When are rattlesnakes most active during the fall?

During these cooler transition times, rattlesnakes become crepuscular, becoming most active in the morning and night's twilight transitions. They often bask and hunt in the morning, hide away during much of the day, and then leave again as the sun sets to travel longer distances.

Throughout October, the first hour after sunset, there will be a surge in rattlesnake movement. It slows overnight, but rattlesnakes can be active even as temperatures dip into the 50s. Then again in the morning, rattlesnakes will be in relatively random locations, typically near temporary hiding spots.

In late October through about the second week of November, rattlesnake activity changes slightly, with less morning movement. Starting in the late afternoon, around 3 pm, they make large straight-line movements towards den locations. This will carry through and peak in the first hour after sunset, then largely stop.

By about the second week of November, most rattlesnakes are where they intend to be for the next few months. So, while encounters will still happen, their nature and cause are very different



Situations like this, with a Western Diamondback Rattlesnake hiding under a door, are often temporary, random events during the fall.



During the fall, rattlesnakes are making large movements towards these locations, sometimes on a path through the backyard.

WESTERN DIAMONDBACK RATTLESNAKES
Crotalus atrox

PINAL COUNTY, ARIZONA
2023

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What can pet owners do about rattlesnakes during the fall?

The situation of dogs with rattlesnakes is very different than it is with people. Rattlesnake bites to dogs are typically on the muzzle and face, meaning it is a secondary encounter. Rattlesnakes don't attack dogs; dogs go after snakes, and snakes defend themselves. The difference is intention, and this means that much can be done.

For any dog owner living where rattlesnakes are, here are some essential actions:

- Have your dogs take rattlesnake avoidance training with a trusted dog trainer.
- Walk the yard before letting the dogs out in the morning and at night. Just a quick perimeter check can reduce the majority of snake bites.
- Never leave dogs unattended in the backyard at dusk or in the first hour after. This is when rattlesnakes are most active, and the majority of bites will occur.
- Contact 24-hour emergency vets in the area ahead of time, and have a plan. Be sure to ask if they treat with antivenom. If they say no, find a different one. Doing this work in advance can save time in the event of a bite, which can greatly affect outcomes.

“Rattlesnakes don't attack dogs, dogs go after snakes, and snakes defend themselves.”



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“What can be done to protect my family from rattlesnakes in the fall?”

Unlike dogs, people can learn and change their behavior with new information. It’s unlikely that you’d intentionally stick your nose on a rattlesnake, so that leaves accidental bites as the situation to avoid.

Here are a few things you can do on a single Saturday that would reduce the chances of you or a loved one taking a rattlesnake bite:

- Keep flashlights near all doors and have a rule that shoes and lights are to be used at all times without exception.
- Clean up any debris in the yard, remove hiding spots, reduce clutter, and do any maintenance necessary to make the yard less snake friendly.
- Consider having a professional visit to inspect the property, make recommendations, and evaluate if the property may be a candidate for rattlesnake fencing.
- Continue becoming knowledgeable about snakes in the area via passive means. We recommend joining a snake identification Facebook group to get a slow flow of information. Over time, this can help immensely with how you feel about the situation.
- In situations where action is necessary, such as a snake near a front door, contact a wildlife services agency. Information on agencies, such as Rattlesnake Solutions, which offer these services can be found online.