

NEWS FROM THE PIT

Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center



1

Guest Interview: Deputy Chief Greg VanAlstine (Santa Rita Fire District's Snake Removal Service)

By: Steve Dudley, PharmD, DABAT

Director, Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center

Normalcy bias is a psychological phenomenon where people tend to underestimate the likelihood or impact of a disaster or crisis. No, News From The Pit hasn't switched to a psychology newsletter but this is an important subject to talk about for one simple reason: if you're in Arizona, you're at risk of a rattlesnake bite! We've talked about the [financial and physical costs of a rattlesnake bite](#) and the best way to avoid one is to never encounter a snake to begin with. This is becoming increasingly hard to do for Arizonans.

Don't just take our word for it. Private companies and some fire departments routinely remove rattlesnakes at the request of concerned citizens. In Green Valley alone, the Santa Rita Fire District (SRFD) received 3,320 calls for snake removal in 2023, roughly 300 calls more than in 2022. This high-level demand led to SRFD taking a novel approach and forming a dedicated snake removal service to combat the problem.

In this issue, we sat down with Deputy Chief Greg VanAlstine, to learn what the Santa Rita Fire Department is doing to protect its citizens.

NEWSLETTER HIGHLIGHTS

Santa Rita Fire District's response to the increase in rattlesnake removal calls.

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

SUBSCRIBE TO THE NEWSLETTER

<https://azpoison.com/content/news-pit-mailing-list>

Guest Interview: Deputy Chief Greg VanAlstine (Santa Rita Fire District's Snake Removal Service)

Continued from page 1

What led to the formation of the snake removal service?

Deputy Chief VanAlstine explains that it was not just the number of calls, but the costs too. Historically, SRFD would take an individual firefighter off of a fire engine to respond to these calls in a station pickup truck. This allowed SRFD to respond to these calls swiftly but left the crews a person short should they have to respond to an emergency. When changes came down requiring crews to stay together, SRFD was forced to send an entire fire engine and its crew to respond. The problem was these trucks get 1-3 miles per gallon and now that they were adding an extra 20 or more calls a day, costs dramatically shot up for maintenance and repair. However, there was still an ethical obligation to respond to these calls as one could reasonably argue this service reduces the number of snake bites. With the average rattlesnake bite costing upwards of \$100,000, it does not take many preventions to produce significant savings. A solution that could free up firefighters and reduce excess wear and tear on the fire trucks was necessary.

Who staffs the service?

SRFD could have hired additional firefighters to help staff this extra service but that would have been fiscally and logistically challenging. Instead, they turned to the community and hired high school students and graduates, who were 18 and over, and trained them on the proper rattlesnake safety and removal techniques. As VanAlstine points out, not only does this free up firefighters for emergency calls, but it's a great opportunity to introduce people to a career in firefighting. SRFD has actually hired a few of these recruits as part of its fire department staff.



Guest Interview: Deputy Chief Greg VanAlstine (Santa Rita Fire District's Snake Removal Service)

Continued from page 2

What is the process for the snake truck service to remove a snake?

If you're in the SRFD district and see a snake on your property, you can call. VanAlstine warns that by far the most requests are between 6 am – 11 am and 3 pm – 9pm. This falls in line with what's been reported to our poison center as the most common time window people are bitten is between 4-10 pm. It's important to note that the service will only remove venomous snakes. Deputy Chief VanAlstine encourages homeowners to leave nonvenomous snakes such as kingsnakes on their property as they do play an important role in our ecosystem and are known to eat rodents and even rattlesnakes as part of their diet.

Once the service identifies a rattlesnake on the property, they safely collect and relocate it to the nearest desert area. While this seems simple, it's actually becoming harder to do. Obviously, they don't want to move a rattlesnake to a new location that is just next to someone else's home only to have them call and move it again. But as these calls continue to increase, along with the construction of new housing developments, it's becoming harder to find adequate spots. As VanAlstine points out, most of these calls are from the middle of town and the staff find themselves having to travel further and further out.



Guest Interview: Deputy Chief Greg VanAlstine (Santa Rita Fire District's Snake Removal Service)

Continued from page 3

Can a rattlesnake bite really happen to you?

If you live in any state in the US besides Maine, Alaska, and Hawai'i, the answer is yes. If you live in Arizona, the answer is hell yes. I asked VanAlstine about this and his answer very convincingly sums up the issue.

"As someone who has picked up snakes for 20 years, they are everywhere, you just don't see them. We have these conversations with homeowners daily. You just don't see them, you don't know they're among you. Homeowners say they've never seen one in 20 years but the reality is the snake has always been there, this is just the first time you've seen them. They're all around you. ...we turn on lights, we bring a flashlight. You can't go out in the dark anymore to put the trash can around the corner. 9 out of 10 times there's probably a snake in your yard."

We're not in the business of fear mongering, but the numbers don't lie. Over half of all bites reported to the Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center happen in or around the home. (Fun fact: Deputy Chief VanAlstine once had to remove a rattlesnake that was resting on top of a person's bed, perfectly coiled, taking a nap.) What's worse, we know the frequency of people encountering snakes on their property is increasing as evidenced by the uptick in snake removal calls reported by fire departments like SRFD as well as private companies like Rattlesnake Solutions. If that weren't enough, over 80% of people bitten never heard the snake rattle. So, if the most likely place for you to be bitten is where more are being found, and you might not see or hear them, you can see how this is a recipe for disaster.

So, what can you do about it?

Now that I've completely fear mongered, let me add some context and good news to this situation. First and foremost, rattlesnake bites are absolutely preventable. Like Deputy Chief VanAlstine mentioned, awareness is key. Simple things like being aware of what's on the ground around you, taking a flashlight with you when walking in the dark, and not sticking your hands in places you can't see are brutally effective ways to reduce your chance of an envenomation. Also, not every home is at risk of a rattlesnake rampage. Living in a highly commercialized area or downtown does not carry the same risk as living next to a native desert. But even if you live in a high-risk area, there are still numerous ways to protect yourself.

Like we mentioned in [our July issue](#), there are plenty of easy tasks you can do to your yard to reduce the chances of a snake calling it home (spoiler: snake repellent is not one of them). For starters, you could remove objects that provide effective shade for snakes or offer them less food and water by replacing plants that attract rodents and require frequent watering for ones that do not. If you really want to step your defenses up, you could also install snake fencing as a physical barrier. As we highlighted in our [last issue](#), when done properly, this is the most effective way to prevent these unwanted intruders.

Whichever route you decide to choose, the first step is recognizing there's a problem and that it could be your problem. But once you have that awareness, there are simple steps you can take to make your time in the desert truly, well, normal.