

NEWS FROM THE PIT

Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center



Not a Tall Tale, Just a Long Tale

How the stars were changed for one fortunate rattlesnake we now call Rusty

By Daniel J Massey, PharmD BCPS

How did Rusty, a western diamondback rattlesnake, become the official mascot of the "Snake Pit"? There's an interesting tale that led Rusty to the Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center. I will attempt to elaborate on the extraordinary circumstances involved with the collection, or should I say, rescue of Rusty.

This tale is not fabricated in any way and may seem excessive, uncalled for, or haphazard to most. However, from a few, likeminded journey persons... masters of their trade, I shall receive a simple nod of understanding. We, "the reptile enthusiasts," can appreciate such empathy that was given to this unfortunate rattlesnake we now call Rusty.

Editor's Note: Please do not try this at home!

NEWSLETTER HIGHLIGHTS

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Image 1 caption: Say hello to Rusty the Rattlesnake! Six years after being rescued. Rusty is named after an RV campsite called, "Rusty's RV Ranch", as this was my basecamp at the time.

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In 2017, I was attending the Biology of Snakes symposium being held “off the beaten path” as they say, at the Chiricahua Desert Museum in Rodeo, New Mexico. Now in Rodeo, there is no gas station, hotel, urgent care, or hospital, just wide-open space that is perfect for hunting rattlesnakes. These types of locations seem to be a necessity when considering a symposium for reptile enthusiasts. [image: 2]

After a full day of lectures and discussions pertaining to all things slithering, I was “itching for some herp’n”. A term derived from herpetology, it’s a turn of phrase for collecting reptiles and amphibians. On a side note, herp’n can be misinterpreted as heroin, another activity that people “itch” over and both are equally addictive depending on the individual.

While exploring the surrounding area, I came across an abandoned and dilapidated ranch house; no windows, doors fallen off the hinges, with plywood and metal roofing sheets laying around. There was even an old, weathered, windmill with broken pipes that no longer feeds the water tank next to a makeshift cattle corral.

Basically, the perfect snake habitat...a herpers dream if you will (remember herp’n not heroin, both equally addictive depending on the individual). [image: 3,4]



Image 2 caption: GoogleMaps showing the remote locations in New Mexico of the town Rodeo and Rusty's rescue site.

Image 3 caption: Abandoned, dilapidated ranch house with collapsed well support structure and pipe.



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While meandering around this disheveled landscape, I came across an abandoned uncovered well, long since dry, that once fed the broken-down windmill. [image: 5] Of course, I had to shine my flashlight into this black pit...and to my surprise, there were two snakes at the bottom! A western diamondback rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*), and a desert kingsnake (*Lampropeltis splendida*). [image: 6, 7] Soon to be known as Rusty, this unfortunate rattlesnake had no idea just how lucky he was.

First, a sympathetic herper showed up; a herper whose only thought was, "How the hell am I going to save these two snakes?" Second, Rusty happened to be much larger than the desert kingsnake, and since kingsnakes eat rattlesnakes, this was very fortunate indeed! Lastly, just to make things more interesting, an ominous storm was darkening the sky; lighting strikes and rolling thunder filled the air.



Image 4 caption: Broken down windmill with adjacent water tank and small cattle corral.

Image 5 caption: Uncovered dry well with broken pipe that once attached to a nearby windmill.



Images 6&7 caption: Rusty trapped at the bottom of the well, with a desert kingsnake as his cell mate.



Image 8 caption: My Jeep Wrangler with winch line lowered into well opening. As an added bonus, no flat tires after driving over metal beams, bars, sheet metal, barbed wire, and nail incrusted wood piles.

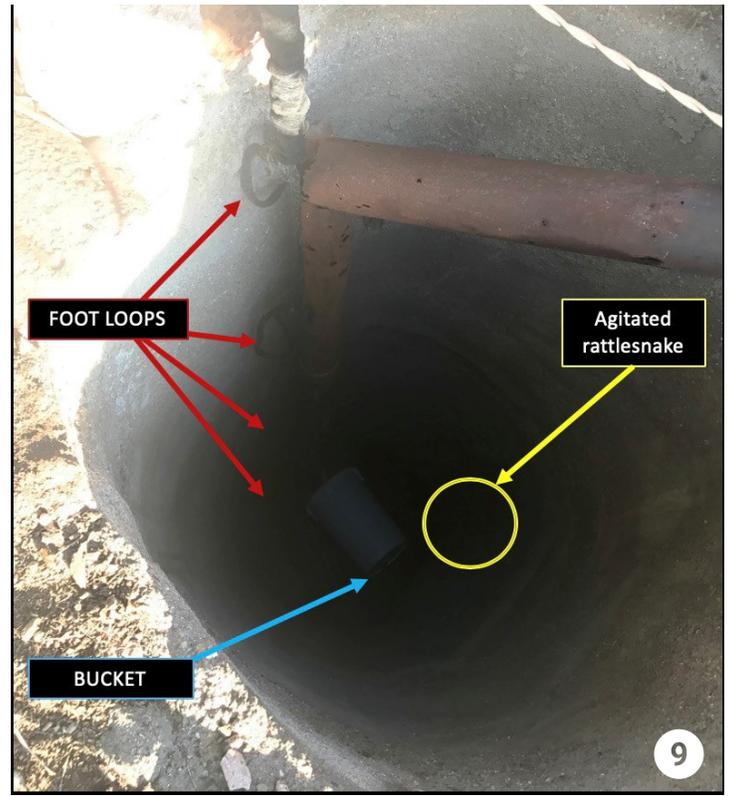


Image 9 caption: Winch line converted to an improvised rope ladder with locations of foot loops, bucket, and agitated rattlesnake.

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Now onto the rescue, and just for some perspective, let me paint the picture. I am alone, sunset is upon me, no cell phone service, literally three hours from the nearest hospital, the sky is darkening, lighting and thunder rumbling, with the smell of rain in the air. And there I am, a bilateral below the knee amputee, stumbling around on prosthetics near an open 20-foot-deep pit with a rattlesnake at the bottom mumbling out loud, "How the hell am I going to get these snakes out of this damn well?"

My solution? The winch on the front bumper of my Jeep! Driving over metal sheets, broken pipes, wood piles, and barbed wire, I pulled within a few feet of the opening. [image: 8] My master plan; using the synthetic winch line, I could tie foot loops creating a makeshift rope ladder...(my inner voice now imitating William Shatner) "it could work...it...could...work". After attaching a bucket to the end of this improvised lifeline, I lowered it into the cement lined pit. [image: 9] Now, as I stood at the edge of the well, a snake hook hanging from my right hip, and feeling a little like Indiana Jones, it literally began to rain! I slowly climbed over the edge and awkwardly managed to fit my prosthetics into each foot loop. One at a time, I slowly descended.

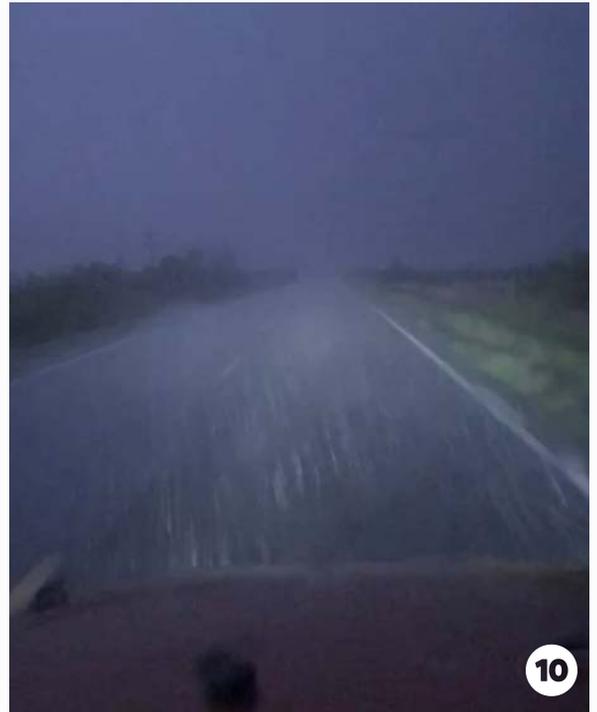
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Remember, there is a rattlesnake at the bottom of this well, who at this point is very agitated, rattling, and in the striking position. So, as I slowly and methodically make it to the bottom, my elbows spanning the width of this narrow stone tube, I gingerly plant my prosthetics so as not to step on either snake. One upside to prosthetics... snake proof shins! Now standing alone with only the sound of my pounding heart ringing in my ears, and Rusty's persistent rattling, I pondered my next move. As I gazed up at the bright round opening above me, Rusty intermittently striking my prosthetics, I audibly say, "What the hell am I doing?" On a side note, if a herper screams for help and no one is around to hear him, does he make a sound? Again, I digress.

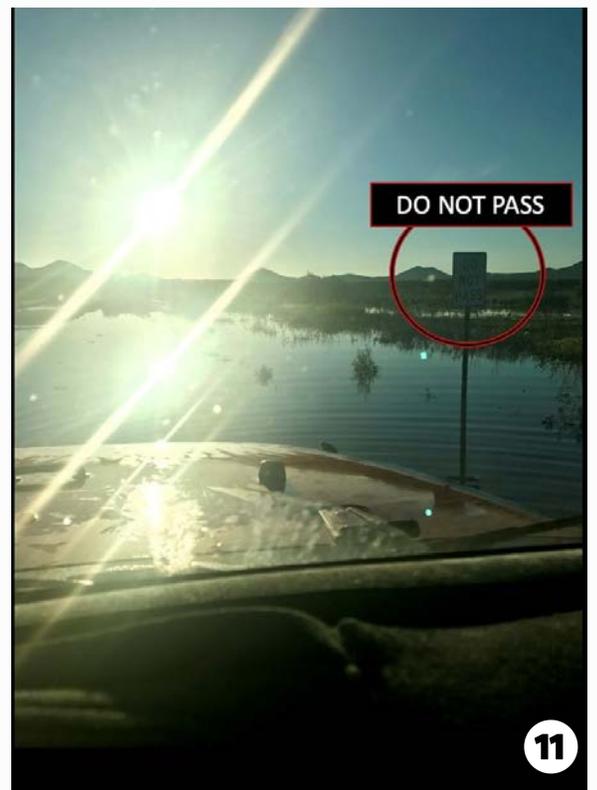
I managed to get both snakes wrangled into the bucket, secured the lid, and attempted to climb back up my "rope of hope". I quickly realized climbing up may be harder than climbing down, and once again I audibly say, "What the hell am I doing?" Exhausted but exhilarated, I clamber out the opening and flop on my back, prosthetics still hanging over the edge of the well...adrenaline running through my veins. I feel ecstatic! (Remember, similar to heroin, pronounced herp'n, and both can be equally addictive depending on the individual).

I quickly release the desert kingsnake, secure the rattlesnake, and frantically respool the winch line as a wall of rain approaches; lightning and thunder now simultaneous, I drive away in a torrent of rain. [image: 10, 11] I grin from ear to ear, inundated with the self-realization that my rescue actually worked. You are welcome, Rusty the Rattlesnake; you are welcome!



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Image 10 caption: Rain was so intense, roads were flooding and washes flowing across the highway. This image is mid-lightning strike while I drive away from the abandoned ranch house.



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Image 11 caption: Highway 9 between Rodeo and Animas, New Mexico, the following morning...both lanes and passing lane were completely flooded. Sign highlighted for clarification and reference to highway shoulder.

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Lastly, back to the herp'n vs heroin (remember, both are equally addictive depending on the individual). They say the first step to overcoming an addiction is admitting you have said addiction. So, as I look back on my inappropriate and potentially self-destructive behavior, my wife now holding my hand, with full support of my family and friends, I audibly repeat these last typed words. "Hello, my name is Dan Massey, Curator of Venomous Animals at the Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center, and I have an addiction...an addiction to herp'n (similar to heroin but different)" ...heavy sigh; damn that felt good. [image: 12]



Image 12 caption: Rusty, the lucky rattlesnake, photographed the day after being rescued.