

Ask an Expert – Snakes Alive, It's That Time Again!

Julene Reese

06/04/2020



Great Basin Rattlesnake

Snakes are one of the slithery signs of late spring and summer. Of the 31 species found in Utah, seven are venomous. These are commonly called pit vipers because of the pit located between their nostrils and eyes. Most pit vipers found in Utah also have tails with a series of rattles, hence the name rattlesnake.

All snakes are classified as non-game animals and are protected by Utah state law. A person cannot collect or possess a live wild snake without receiving a Certificate of Registration from the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources. When there are human, domestic pet and livestock safety concerns, a venomous snake may be killed without a certificate.

Because most snakes in Utah are non-venomous, most human-snake encounters are generally not dangerous. However, if you encounter a venomous snake and are bitten, the consequences could be serious. Consider these tips.

* If you encounter a snake, leave it alone. Every year, hundreds of want-to-be herpetologists and snake charmers are bitten when they try to capture or kill a snake. Even dead snakes have been known to bite by reflex action. More than half of the reported snake bites were a result of someone trying to handle or kill the snake. It is always best to leave the area if you encounter a venomous snake.

* When rattlesnakes are encountered or disturbed, the rapid vibration of their tails will make a characteristic rattling sound to warn the intruder. However, not all rattlesnakes will “rattle” when disturbed. For this reason, when you are in rattlesnake country, pay close attention to where you walk, sit and place your hands. Rattlesnakes can be found throughout Utah in sagebrush, pinon-juniper woodlands, sand dunes, rocky hillsides, grasslands and mountain forests.

* If you hear a rattlesnake “rattle,” stand still until you can locate where the sound is coming from. Do not try to jump or run. If you do, you may end up within the snake’s striking range.

* If you are bitten by a venomous snake, there are several things NOT to do. Do not engage in physical activity such as walking or running. Do not apply a tourniquet to the area above the wound, and do not apply a cold compress to the bite area. Do not cut into the bite. Do not take anything by mouth to include stimulants or pain medications unless instructed by a physician. Do not raise the bite area above the level of the heart, and do not try to suction the venom, as doing so may cause more harm than good.

* All venomous snakebites should be considered life threatening. When someone has been bitten by a venomous snake, time is of the essence. If possible, call ahead to the emergency room so anti-venom can be ready when the victim arrives. Until then, keep the victim calm, restrict movement, and keep the affected area below heart level to reduce the flow of venom. Wash the bite area with soap and water. Remove any rings or constricting items, as the affected area will swell. Cover the bite with clean, moist dressing to reduce swelling and discomfort. Monitor the victim’s vital signs (pulse, temperature, breathing, blood pressure). If there are signs of shock, lay the victim flat and cover with a warm blanket. Get medical help immediately. If it can be done without risk of injury, bring in the dead snake for identification.

* Non-venomous snakebites are harmless, but there is a risk of infection. If bitten, clean and sterilize the wound much like you would a cut or abrasion. Bites from venomous snakes will almost instantly show signs of swelling and discoloration of the surrounding tissue. Other symptoms include a tingling sensation, nausea, rapid pulse, loss of muscle coordination and weakness. Also, bites from rattlesnakes will show two characteristic fang marks (punctures) as well as other teeth marks.

For more information about snakes, visit WildAwareUtah.org.