

2002

Why Am I Seeing So Many Snakes, And What Should I Do If I Encounter One?

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Recommended Citation

Messmer, Terry, "Why Am I Seeing So Many Snakes, And What Should I Do If I Encounter One?" (2002). *All Archived Publications*. Paper 408.

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A weekly question/answer column

**Why Am I Seeing So Many Snakes, And
What Should I Do If I Encounter One?**

Terry Messmer answers:*

Utah is home to 31 species of snakes, and our warm spring has contributed to more of them being seen. Of the 31 species in our state, only 7 are venomous. Thus, the chances of most people encountering a venomous snake in their neighborhoods are slim. All snakes should be considered to be beneficial but, if you live, work or play in areas of Utah inhabited by venomous snakes, caution should be exercised. In general, bites from venomous snakes should be considered life threatening.

The primary venomous snake found in Utah is the rattlesnake. Rattlesnakes can be found throughout the state in sagebrush, pinonjuniper woodlands, sand dunes, rocky hillsides, grasslands and mountain forests. They live at elevations of less than 1000 feet and at timberline.

Rattlesnakes are often heard before they are seen. When alarmed they make a rattling sound by rapidly moving their tail. The number of rattles varies with the size of the snake. The rattle acts as a warning to let the intruder know that the snake is present. 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 this, you may end up within the snake’s biting range.

If you are bitten by a venomous snake the surrounding tissue will almost instantly show signs of swelling and discoloration. A tingling sensation and nausea usually accompany these symptoms. When someone has been bitten, time is of the essence. If possible, call ahead to the emergency room so anti-venom can be ready when the victim arrives.

Do the following things as you take a snakebite victim to medical care:

- 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; the affected area will swell.
- Cover the bite with a clean, moist dressing to reduce swelling and discomfort.
- Monitor vital signs (pulse, temperature, breathing, blood pressure) of the victim. If there are signs of shock, lay the victim flat and cover with a warm blanket.
- Get help immediately.
- Bring in the dead snake if this can be done without further risk of injury.

Here are some things you SHOULD NOT do:

- DO NOT allow the person to engage in physical activity such as walking or running. Carry the victim if he or she needs to be moved.

- DO NOT apply a tourniquet to the area above the wound.
- DO NOT apply a cold compress to the bite area.
- DO NOT cut into the bite.
- DO NOT give the victim stimulants or pain medications unless instructed by a physician.
- DO NOT give the victim anything by mouth.
- DO NOT raise the bite area above the level of the victim's heart.
- DO NOT try to suction the venom — doing so may cause more harm than good.

* Terry Messmer is Utah State University Extension Wildlife Specialist