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THE RATTLESNAKE, NOT SUCH A BAD FELLOW

by
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Rattlesnakes are found only in the Western Hemisphere and reach their greatest concentration in the southwestern United States and northern Mexico. As far as numbers of forms are concerned, Arizona is the stamping ground for rattlesnakes in America. No less than fifteen sub-species are found within its borders. The largest rattlesnake in the country is the Eastern Diamond which reaches a length of more than eight feet and a weight of more than fifteen pounds. The next largest is the Western Diamond. The smallest rattler is said to be the Ridge-nosed. All of these and many more inhabit Arizona, *except the Eastern Diamond.*

The two common rattlesnakes found in Oregon are the Great Basin rattler and the Pacific rattler. The first one is found south and east of the line Upper Klamath Lake, Fort Rock, and Burns. The Pacific rattlesnake is found west of this same line. It is absent from northwestern Oregon west of the Cascades and from southwestern Oregon immediately bordering the coast.

Rattlers are active during the day in spring and autumn, but nocturnal in the heat of summer. Usually in March, according to the weather, they issue from hibernation and are abroad in search of food and mates. Later they become wary and roam about at night when rodents are out also. In the South, no rattler can stand the heat of the summer sun and will die in a short time if exposed to it.

Adult male rattlers are a little larger than females and can be recognized by their thicker and longer tails. They mate in the spring and the young are born, not hatched from eggs, between August and October. The young shift for themselves as soon as born. Both the hearing and sight of rattlers are none too good, and just before shedding their skins are nearly blind. Although dangerous, this snake is not vicious unless cornered.

One day while in Arizona, we decided to be on hand at the coming-out of some of these big rattlers near Tucson. On March 11, we headed for a particular dry wash near the foothills of the Santa Rita Mts. It was a balmy, portentous day for the releasing of the reptiles from their long sleep. Arriving at our destination, we walked carefully in the middle of the wash, the deep sand smothering

our steps. Gazing up at the yellowish, corroded bank and overhanging rim, we scanned the rubbish heaps of old desert rat nests that had been appropriated by the marauding army of vipers, most of the rats having long since made fat meals for the new tenants. Here were the dark dens of the diamonds and perhaps a black-tailed rattler.

For over an hour we searched with field-glasses a space of a hundred feet along the bank. It was as dead as a tomb. The silent wash became a spooky place prescient with evil ghosts that might be lurking under any stone or bush. A sneaking breeze stole upon the bushes and they rattled their dry limbs. It kept me turning my head and listening, listening for that slight whisper, that slither of a snake.

Then, there he was sprawled lifeless in a mass of rat trash and boulders under a rock shelf. He looked exactly like a big black stick that had been there all the time, except that now its tail was up and showed a clear black-and-white patch between the chunky body and the rattles, a big diamond. There were eight rattles and a button. He was not brilliant, his pattern dull gray-brown. Not a very ominous looking fellow, I thought.

It was a little past high noon, the sun shining almost straight down. Soon there was another dark form with its head just protruding from a crack in the wall. Further along, two much larger snakes lay among the sticks and rocks, no sign of movement, no sound of their coming. In a half hour, there were nine snakes like dark stripes on the bank. As they warmed up some, two big fellows close together began to push sluggishly at each other. Even though it was a slow battle, the power in the big muscles finally bowled one over and he rolled lumpily down the bank a little way.

The exciting game began of testing his temper and finding how to get him out in the sand of the wash. Billie got a long stick with a crook at the end, and taking a heavy net with a metal frame, he scrambled up the hillside. The snake was still half torpid. However, when he was hooked suddenly into the air and sent spinning off into the sand, he instinctively coiled and his head reared up, the forked tongue licking in and out of his mouth.

A few minutes in the warm sand and he started up the hill for his den.