



Reptile & Amphibian Residents of the Nature Center

Bandit the Western Rattlesnake

Personal History:

Our Western rattlesnake arrived here in the fall of 1991. It had been left at the front door of the Sacramento Science Center. The Science Center gave it to the Nature Center because EYNC had housed rattlesnakes in the past and has appropriate, locked caging facilities. Since the rattlesnake was less than one year old, the original idea was to keep it for the winter, then release it in the spring.



However, the California Fish and Game Department requires that snakes must be released in the same location they were captured to prevent interbreeding of snakes from different geographic areas. Since this snake was an orphan, we did not know where it was originally captured. We have been allowed to permanently keep it here instead. Our rattlesnake still has its fangs and venom so it is kept in a locked cage. Only authorized EYNC staff may open the cage or move the rattlesnake.

Natural History: Western Rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridis*)

Description: Adults grow up to 5 feet long or more. The color varies considerably between individuals, ranging from shades of tan, green, gray, or black with contrasting diamond-shaped markings on the back. The tail is always tipped with at least one button and individuals may have a long string of rattles. The rattlesnake may be distinguished from other local snakes by its triangular shaped head and the abrupt narrowing of the neck behind the head. In other snakes, the width of the head is the same as the neck.

Habitat: The Western rattlesnake occurs in the valley but is found in largest numbers in brush and chaparral areas of the foothills.

Food: They mainly eat rodents such as rats, mice and squirrels. It may also eat birds, lizards, and rarely other snakes. Rattlesnakes kill their prey by striking and injecting venom through hollow fangs. Smaller prey is usually immediately stunned; larger animals may run some distance but are trailed by the snake, then swallowed whole.

Reproduction and Care of Young: Rattlesnakes, unlike most other snakes, bear live young. The female retains the fertilized eggs in her body until the young are hatched and born alive. Although mating takes place in spring, young are not born until late summer or fall. Each brood typically includes 9 or 10 babies. Newborns are about 10 inches long and have a small horny button on the tip of the tail. They are born with venom and short fangs, ready to strike at anything threatening. The young rattlesnakes are often considered more dangerous than the adults because they might strike repeatedly, injecting more venom than needed. They shed for the first time 7-10 days after birth and add their first rattle.

Hibernation: Rattlesnakes seek out a protected crevice where they hibernate for the winter. They remain in this den from October until the air reaches about 70 degrees.

Additional Information: The rattlesnake, this area's only poisonous reptile, is the subject of much misinformation and folklore. However, the danger posed by rattlesnakes is blown way out of proportion to the actual threat. Few people are actually bitten by rattlesnakes, because they are secretive and avoid encounters with humans. Unlike most other snakes, rattlesnakes are slow, even lethargic, and not usually aggressive unless cornered.

How does the rattle make noise? The rattle is put together like a stack of teacups. Each cup is attached to the next and has three small bumps on it. When the snake shakes its tail, the bumps tap the inside of the adjacent cup. Since the snake tail shakes over 50 times each second, all that tapping sounds like a continuous hiss.