

Venomous Snakes

by: John & Heidi Rao

It is very important for individuals who actively engage in outdoor activities to know how to avoid venomous snakes while in the field. A chance encounter with a venomous snake can happen at any time and often a bite occurs before the animal is ever seen. Snakes occur in almost all of North America with the exception of the extreme northern part of the continent. In other words, if you venture outdoors, there is a chance of having a potentially deadly encounter with a venomous snake! Knowing how to avoid venomous snakes in the field can reduce the risk of being bitten.

When in snake country, wear boots and long pants while walking around, especially early in the morning or late in the evening. This is the time that most snakes are active. Watch where you step to avoid stepping on or startling a snake when walking in the field. Reptiles are the masters of disguise and have developed camouflage that literally lets them blend into their surroundings. Also, if you have to reach into crevices, logs, or holes, look very carefully before doing so. If you are picking up firewood, debris, or other materials that snakes can hide beneath, use a pole or rod to make sure no snake is underneath before using your hands. It is important to remember that venomous snakes are ambush hunters and can spend many hours, and in some cases days, motionless waiting for prey. The chance is far greater that a snake will sense your presence long before you see it. Unfortunately for some people, they are first aware of a snake after they have been bitten.

Their ability to hide and blend into their surroundings is what makes venomous snakes so dangerous. Snakes can be in your campsite without ever being detected, until it is too late. There are stories of rattlesnakes crawling into sleeping bags of unsuspecting campers, or cowboys waking up in the morning only to find a rattlesnake curled up on their chest. All these legends aside, it is very possible to find snakes under tents, chuck boxes, or other gear when breaking camp.

The number one cause of getting bitten by a venomous snake is due to human interference. Often, people are bitten attempting to catch or capture a venomous snake. Venomous snakes can strike over 1/3 of their body length. A 6-foot western diamondback rattlesnake can strike between 2 and 2 ½ feet. Where coral snakes lack in striking ability, they more than make up the difficulty in handling. Coral snakes are very hard to control because of their slick bodies. Even dead coral snakes pose a potential threat. There are many recorded cases of an individual picking up a dead venomous snake or the severed head of a snake, and receiving a life-threatening dose of venom. The best way to handle a venomous snake is to leave it alone.

There are some venomous snakes that are less deadly than other venomous snakes. Often, copperhead bites are considered relatively minor and only the symptoms are treated as they occur. In Texas, antivenin is usually not given unless it is to a very young or an elderly victim. Venom from Mojave and rock rattlesnakes are regarded as very potent because of the makeup of their venom. Eastern and western diamondback rattlesnakes usually involve relatively large amounts of venom being injected.

There are approximately 20 different species of venomous snakes that can be encountered in North America. Some venomous snakes such as the Western Rattlesnake have many subspecies and are the most widely dispersed. Others such as the Rock Rattlesnake and the Mojave Rattlesnake are more specialized and have a limited range. It is important to make yourself familiar with the venomous snakes that live in the area that you are entering.

DISTRIBUTION OF VENOMOUS SNAKES IN THE UNITED STATES

Southeastern United States

Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake – *Crotalus adamanteus*

Timber Rattlesnake – *Crotalus horridus*

Pigmy rattlesnake – *Sistrurus miliarius*

Copperhead – *Agkistrodon contortrix*

Water Moccasin – *Agkistrodon piscivorus*

Eastern or Texas Coral Snake – *Micrurus fulvius*

Southwestern United States

Western Diamondback Rattlesnake – *Crotalus atrox*

Rock Rattlesnake – *Crotalus lepidus*

Mojave Rattlesnake – *Crotalus scutulatus*

Blacktail Rattlesnake – *Crotalus molossus*

Sidewinder – *Crotalus cerastes*

Speckled Rattlesnake – *Crotalus mitchellii*

Twin-Spotted Rattlesnake – *Crotalus pricei*

Red Diamond Rattlesnake – *Crotalus ruber*

Tiger Rattlesnake – *Crotalus tigris*

Ridgenose Rattlesnake – *Crotalus willardi*

Arizona Coral Snake – *Micruroides euryxanthus*

Western United States (Texas North to Canada to West Coast)

Western Rattlesnake – *Crotalus viridis*

Central United States (Eastern New Mexico to Great Lakes)

Massasauga Rattlesnake – *Sistrurus catenatus*