



Fort Carson-MEDDAC News

Snakes sneak out in Spring

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Spring officially began on March 20th. Outdoor activities will soon fill our afternoons and provide many opportunities to wash the cars, tend to yard work, or simply take the dog for a walk. It is time to shake the winter-time blues. Remember, as the weather warms, we are not the only Colorado inhabitants motivated by the warm hello of the sun.

Colorado is home to 26 species of snakes. Two of those 26 are venomous and reside in the Fort Carson region: The Prairie Rattlesnake and the Massasauga. Massa what? Right, I was not familiar with this species of rattlesnake either. The Massasauga calls southeastern Colorado home, including El Paso County. This rattlesnake favors altitudes below 5,500 feet in elevation. In contrast, the Prairie Rattlesnake can thrive in elevations up to 9,000 feet. Although the rattlesnake is frequently feared, fatalities are rarely associated with their bites.

In the United States, approximately 8,000 to 10,000 people are bitten by venomous snakes annually. Less than 1 percent die. Comparatively speaking, the honey bee in the garden, the lightning in the spring storms, and even your commute to work pose a greater danger to you than the rattlesnake. There was one fatality in the entire United States attributed to a rattlesnake bite in 2012. What was this person doing when they were bitten? Handling a rattlesnake as part of an outdoor religious service.

Sadly, many of these snakes are killed on sight and without cause. Sadly? Yes, these snakes are highly specialized predators that are an essential component of Colorado's ecosystem.

Colorado's rattlesnakes become active in April and May. They require heat to digest their food, and are often found absorbing heat by basking on a road, path, or rock in the afternoon and early evening hours. Colorado rattlesnakes are easily identifiable, when you can see them. They blend perfectly with their surroundings, and are usually not discovered until they employ their rattle as a warning. Rattlesnakes have a large triangular head, heat-sensing pit on their snout, vertical pupils and a thick body. The rattle gives it away usually; you can see it *and* hear it. If the snake's agitation persists, it will elevate into a "S" coil, inflate its body, hiss, and rattle rapidly. Give this snake wide berth. What do you do if you encounter a rattlesnake?

Freeze in place. Freezing movement will reduce the threat posed to the snake.



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Seek and establish safe distance. Rattlesnakes can strike to a distance of half of their body length. Back away slowly.

Leave the snake alone. One-third of bites are a result of trying to handle or kill the snake.

In the unlikely event that you become a recipient of a rattlesnake bite, stay calm and seek medical attention immediately.

Stay calm and keep a cool head is best when crossing paths with this slithering predator. Having a healthy fear of the rattlesnake is expected, and no one should ever attempt to handle this snake. However it is thought of, these creatures are an essential member of the eco-system and should be respected while you both enjoy the warmer months ahead.



Article author Jody Hughes took this picture at his home about 11 miles from Evans Army Community Hospital. He was about 15 feet away from the snake.