

Rattlers - The Dangerous Reptiles!

Snakes are probably the reptiles that fascinate and repel us the most. One of the most visited booths at any outdoor show is the reptile area, with the little kids standing around and squealing at one special area - the area where the rattlesnakes are kept. Milking rattlesnakes has been a popular sideshow item for many years at local fairs and county shows. There are about thirty different species of rattlers, and all of them live in America.

Let's look at these wonderful reptiles and get to know them a little better. The two largest, on average, are the eastern and western diamondbacks. The average length of an adult eastern diamondback is around four feet, and the average length of a western diamondback is about three and a half feet. There are reports of diamondbacks that were more than ten feet, but facing a live rattler may add a few feet to the story. The largest ones that have actually been measured have been just under eight feet long. A six-foot rattler can weigh as much as 11 pounds.

Generally reptiles are not thought of as beautiful animals, but a rattler has many wonderful designs to look at. The eastern diamondback, with a general pattern of grey brown diamonds all along its body, has a raccoon-like black mask over its eyes. The Santa Catalina rattlesnake (found only on Santa Catalina Island) has markings similar to heavy eyebrows above its eyes. Another fascinating feature of a rattler is the pits seen on either side of the face. These are not related to the venom glands, but are organs that detect radiant heat. The snakes use these to detect things that are close by and are warmer than the general surroundings. In this way, the pits can help locate of small animals such as mice. Since these reptiles have poor eyesight, they use the pits and their sense of smell to determine where their next lunch is coming from.

The most noticeable feature of the rattlesnake is the rattle itself, and rattles are not found on any other reptiles. The rattles are made of the same material that forms horns, claws, and our fingernails. The "fingernail" at the tip of the tail forms a rattle, and when the snake sheds its skin, this part does not come entirely off, forming a new rattle. A few snakes have been found that have as many as twenty-three rattles on their tail.

Reptiles, and snakes in particular, have very unusual ways to get around. A rattler can use the muscles in its body to push against small irregularities, or bumps, in the surface of the ground. As the snake goes by, each part of the snake pushes against the bump so that it looks like the standard snake "wiggle". The bumps may not seem very visible to us, and it might just be a slightly

thicker than usual clump of grass in a grassy field. But what happens if a western diamondback is caught on a flat rock with nothing to push against? In this case, it uses the scales on its belly, and uses them in the same way a multi-legged caterpillar uses its feet. This motion is much slower, but is also quieter, and is used by rattlers to silently get their prey within striking distance.

This is a short introduction into one of the most absorbing of the reptiles, the rattlers. Visit a rattlesnake exhibit at your local zoo or county fair, and look closely at them and watch their movements. You will be delighted.