

## Snakes are Nice People

September 25, 1951

Jim Blackton has been a resident of Japatul Valley since 1946. He has the foreign car agency in Alpine and handles garden supplies from tractors to seeds. Another interesting sidelight of Jim is that during his years in Los Angeles he would frequently be called upon by the courts placing boys under probation to him because of his keen interest and understanding in helping boys who were in trouble.

---

The title is probably enough to send lots of people into hysterics but just finish reading this and you'll see what I mean.

The first instinct of most people is to shoot or mash a snake to death—ANY snake. Unless this practice ceases—and soon—we are in for lots of trouble with a capital "T."

Everybody understands what is meant by the balance of nature but perversely they refuse to believe that it applies to snakes, and oh, how wrong they are.

If every rancher could have a few snakes, owls and hawks living undisturbed on his place the rodent damage to crops, orchards and gardens would be reduced by untold millions of dollars per year. The principal diet of all the above are gophers, ground squirrels, cottontails, rats, mice and bugs. Take away the natural rodent destroyers and the rodents breed faster than man made traps and poisons can maintain the natural balance. Notice that I say maintain the balance, for man made destroyers alone cannot even maintain the balance to say nothing of exterminating the pests.

Of the four poisonous reptiles found in North America, only one, the Rattlesnake, is found in this area. Except in the extreme cases noted below for Heaven's sake leave him alone. Leave all other snakes alone in any case.

I challenge any authority to prove that any normal healthy adult, with blood and heart in good condition ever died from a rattlesnake bite. You will get sick, yes, deathly sick—so sick you will be afraid you won't die, but you'll get over it. Prompt attention with any good anti-venom, a razor blade or knife incision in the form of a cross directly over the bite and suck out the venom and you will be O.K. If you die you do so because of fear, a weak heart or poor blood condition. Most cases die from a morbid and unfounded fear caused by the three Texas brothers? The first was bitten by a rattler through his boot. After the funeral the second brother put on the boots. The "fangs" (ha-ha) still sticking in the boot killed him too. The last brother waited six months before putting on the boots. Yep, he also kicked the bucket. It's amazing how many people believe that story.

Now let's get down to the cases where a rattler should (unfortunately) be killed. Any snake is greatly limited in its wanderings because of its extremely slow method of locomotion. Snakes don't just wander around. Like us they have a home and don't like to get far away. About a mile in extreme cases, more generally a half mile is the limit of their travel. If there are children on the premises and a rattler shows up near the house he should be killed because this indicates his home is nearby. If he appears near the chicken pen or rabbit hutches he should be done away with, although rats, skunks and other predatory animals do far more damage. If he shows up in the hog pen don't bother. He can't hurt the pigs and they invariably kill him themselves and eat him. No damage is caused to pigs or humans who eventually eat the pigs. If you find one over a half mile from the house or pens leave him along—he'll

pay you back many times over. Don't be afraid of all the little rattlers mama and poppa rattler will produce. Owls, hawks and Kingsnakes will keep them in balance. A Kingsnake will eat rodents and bugs when hungry but never if he can find a rattler.

Many years ago, in Florida, there was a snake farm next to my boatyard. The guy who ran it got to seeing snakes and pink elephants coming out of the bottle so I bought the joint for \$300, and that's how I became interested in snakes. There I had the other three poisonous snakes of this continent—Copperhead, Cotton Mouth Moccasin and Coral Snake. Do you notice that all those names begin with C? It's a long way down the alphabet from C to R and that makes just about the difference in their deadlines. In addition to supplying snakes to zoos and carnivals I sold them to a concern who extracted the venom to make anti-venom kits. I also let tourists in at two bits a head. In order to insure some measure of protection to the visitors I let two large Kingsnakes roam at will around the place and there was never any trouble. I also had Oscar, my pet six foot kingsnake (they grow big in Florida) around the house and never a cockroach, Florida Water Bug or mouse did I ever see. Oscar would twine around the rungs of my chair and lay his head in my lap for a good scratching. Snakes are not cold and clammy to the touch. They are warm, smooth and soft. They kill their natural prey by striking, poison or constriction. Remember that no snake can strike more than the measure of one third of his length. They need the other two thirds for anchor. A rattler will always let you know he's around. That's how he got his name. He never wants to fight with you and will always try to get away if you let him. All snakes are largely nocturnal so it's a good idea to carry a flash light at night. You won't need it for the rattler, he'll let you know where he is, but there's no use in having the little woman scared to death by treading on a nice fat gopher snake. Speaking of gopher snakes, we found one the other day sound asleep in one of our rabbit hutches. Our buck was leaning against him, also sound asleep. I picked up the snake and put him over in the orchard where he will do me some good. Why don't you folks try this instead of killing him? You don't have to pick him up. He'll ride on a stick, or, you can take off your shirt, tie a knot at the end of the sleeve, slide him in and tote him to wherever you want to put him.

Now I'm no herpetologist, I'm just a guy who learned the truth about snakes and during the learning came to respect the good they do and to admire them for their many other fine qualities. Just so you don't think I'm completely nuts I also like pie a la mode and fishing. I've been bitten five times by rattlers which proves they are not so deadly but every one of the bites was due to my own carelessness in handling them or disregarding the few simple precautions such as wearing good stout boots in snake country. The three Texas brothers to the contrary, a rattler cannot bite through a boot. Nor do the number of buttons indicate its age.

In closing, I hope this little article has helped to eradicate some of the fear a lot of you have of snakes. If one is crossing the road while you are driving your car try to avoid him. If you find one down in the south forty leave him there. If you leave him alone, he'll let you alone. Too bad this sorry old world can't live by that last remark. We'd sure be a lot better off.

Jim Blackton