How to coexist safely with rattlesnakes
By Lisa Bloch

What a gorgeous spring we're having. I think Marin looks even more verdant than it usually is this time of year. In addition to all the trees becoming lush, wildflowers blooming, baby wildlife being born and more humans out on the trails, another important part of the season is also appearing more often — the northern Pacific rattlesnake. They're looking to gather food, bask in the sunlight, and prepare for the next hibernation.

Before you cancel your upcoming hike after reading that last part, take a breath. With a little knowledge, you and Marin's only venomous snake can coexist peacefully. The reality is, rattlesnakes don't want to meet you any more than you want to meet them.

These animals aren't aggressive by nature and only bite when they feel cornered or threatened, so the trick is not to do either. In addition, that rattle you might hear is a warning — something other venomous snakes don't give before striking. It's a rattlesnake's way of saying, "Excuse me, I'm here, please give me space."

Most bites happen when people accidentally step on a rattlesnake or, worse, try to handle one. If you're out on a trail, practice these strategies, especially from spring through fall, when rattlesnakes are most active:

• Stick to open, established trails where you can clearly see the ground ahead of you.

• Step onto logs and rocks rather than over them.

• Look carefully around and under logs and rocks before sitting down.

• Avoid placing your hands or feet where you can't see clearly.

• If you see a rattlesnake, give it a wide berth and, of course, keep your dog away.

Speaking of dogs, curious snouts can get into trouble on trails, so keep your dog on leash or, at the very least, close to you and under strict voice control. Teaching your dog to "leave it" is one of the most useful tools in keeping them safe.

If you or your dog is bitten, medical intervention is needed immediately. Hospitals in California and emergency pet hospitals carry antivenom, and the sooner you get to one, the

better. The more immobile you can keep yourself or your dog, the better, as movement allows the venom to travel more quickly throughout the body.

While the death rate in California for humans bitten by rattlesnakes averages none or one per year, this year has seen an unusually high number, with three fatalities. This has been attributed to the extremely warm days we saw at the beginning of the season, according to the San Francisco Chronicle.

When it comes to our homes, it's important to tidy up outside areas. Rattlesnakes are attracted to the same things rodents are —debris, woodpiles and dense ground cover. They're actually quite beneficial to our gardens since they provide free, natural and highly effective pest control by eating rodents and insects harmful to plants.

If you do discover a "danger noodle" — as some call them — in your yard, don't panic. Keep kids and pets away, and in a few hours, it will likely leave of its own accord. If it hasn't moved on, a Marin Humane animal services officer can come and safely relocate the guest that's overstaying their welcome away from your home.

Rattlesnakes are a native and important part of our ecosystem, and they've been here a lot longer than we have. With a bit of awareness, we can coexist peacefully with these unique beings.

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