

The Western diamondback rattlesnake's

reputation as an aggressor is undeserved.

The snake is a peaceful reptile and is no threat to

people unless it is cornered or provoked.

When it is alarmed, it rattles its tail to

frighten off the intruder.

HABITS

During cool months the Western diamondback rattlesnake is *diurnal* (active during the day, when the sun can warm its body). Throughout the summer it is *nocturnal*, or active at night, emerging after dusk to hunt.

When the snake is not active it spends its time in holes underground, in rocky crevices, or under dead cacti or large boulders. In the coldest winter weather 30 or more snakes hibernate together in underground dens.

The rattlesnake sheds its skin three to four times a year. Rival males test each other's strength during an activity that resembles a dance. But the snakes never harm each other.



SPECIAL ADAPTATIONS

The snake's rattle is made of hard sections of old skin. A new one is added each time the snake sheds its skin. The sections fit loosely over each other in an interlocking series.

Once the snake is fully mature its rattle does not change size. Older segments drop off at the same rate as the new ones develop.



P Morris Photographics

FOOD & HUNTING

The rattlesnake can swallow almost any small bird or mammal. A three-foot-long rattlesnake can easily swallow a half-grown rabbit.

When hunting, the rattler either waits under a bush for prey to pass by or actively searches for prey by investigat-

ing burrows, crevices, and vegetation. It hunts using a combination of sight, smell, and heat detection and can locate warm-blooded prey in total darkness.

The rattlesnake can also detect vibrations made by animals moving nearby.



S Dalton/NHPA

Above: *The Western diamondback rattlesnake about to strike.*

Right: *A female gives birth.*

BREEDING

Mating takes place in March and April. The female is *ovoviviparous*; that is, she produces eggs that are hatched within her body so that the young are born alive. This protects them from extremes of temperature before they are hatched.

The young snakes inside the mother are encased in a membrane instead of in a shell. If the membrane does not burst when the young are born, they must break through it. They are born in late July or early August.



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RATTLESNAKE & MAN

People have always regarded the rattlesnake as a threat, despite the fact that it bites only if provoked.

Organized hunting groups gather in some western states every year. Huge numbers of rattlesnakes are collected, killed, and skinned. Many are

sold to be eaten.

Although the original purpose of the hunting roundups was to rid populated areas of the dangerous snakes, the events now attract collectors who travel from all over the world to participate in the hunt.

DID YOU KNOW?

- One species of rattlesnake on Catalina Island off the coast of California has no rattle.
- The longer the snake's rattle, the quieter is its sound.
- More people are bitten by diamondback rattlesnakes than any other North American poisonous snake. But the Mojave rattlesnake is 20 times more lethal.
- More people in the United States die each year from lightning strikes than from snake bites.