

He Knew Darn Well It Was a Snake, Before He Picked It Up



Rosy Boa

### **By Ken Cable**

In the much acclaimed book titled “Snakes of Hawaii,” published in 1972, author V. Ralph Knight, Jr. succinctly points out that there are none. This cannot be said of Canyon Lake, California. While I have only met one snake in our community, I recently learned that we are home to a wide array of serpents, most of whom are harmless to human, although I will cast a slight

shadow over that notion as we proceed. There is the ubiquitous Gopher snake, a reptile of varied coloration, the Red Racer, the Rosy Boa, Garter snakes in endless variety, and legless lizards. And, of course, there are rattlesnakes.

Rattlesnakes come in a variety of sub-species, colors, shapes and sizes. They exist in almost every habitat in the United States, except of course, Hawaii. In the east, the largest rattlesnake – the eight foot Eastern Diamondback – competes for habitat with what many claim may be the smallest – the twenty-two inch Pygmy rattler, both endemic to the Carolinas, Florida and perhaps Louisiana. Rattlesnake admirers in southern Arizona and New Mexico, on the other hand, will doubtless argue that their Ridge Nosed rattler, at eighteen inches, is the smallest. Regardless, they are all venomous. This includes the Western Diamond Back that occasionally shows up in Canyon Lake.

There are few hunters, fishermen, hikers and campers who have not encountered snakes in the wild. They are everywhere – up on the mountainside, down in the desert, deep in forests and even out at sea. Oh, and if you live in close proximity to their environment, you may find them in your yard or, perhaps sunning on your porch. Wherever they are encountered, the rule is “don’t touch” (very good advice)! And, if you live in a place where snakes visit, it would be good to learn a little about them.

I recently took advantage of an opportunity to learn about the snakes of Canyon Lake at a reptile seminar presented by science teacher Katherine Blakemore and amateur herpetologist, Dr. Vick Knight, Jr. in the conference room at the Canyon Lake Property Owners Association. There were slides, props, and at least two live snakes in the presentation (here I learned that I didn’t know the difference between a Gopher snake

and a Rosy Boa). Answers to questions from the kids in the audience confirmed that while snakes slither, they are not slimy – and they can climb trees.

Snakes are revered, reviled and often eaten in various parts of the world (occasionally some snakes eat back – or try to). In India, the cobra is worshipped as a God. In China, people eat them. While traveling one year in Canton Province, China, our group was taken to an open-air marketplace in the countryside and allowed to wander about. We had taken a boat out of Victoria Harbor, up the Pearl River to Macao, transferred to a people's bus, passed into China through a gate guarded by teenagers carrying assault rifles on to an empty multi-lane freeway used for drying the rice harvest, and eventually to the marketplace. Most of the food was fresh. Small, live ducks were strung together by their feet like bunches of grapes, frogs were displayed the same way, live fish swam in tubs, and a writhing mass of reptiles was contained in a large wire basket. These were cobras.

Shopping for the cobras was almost ceremonial. The shopper stood in front of the vendor who held up one of his trophies for inspection. The buyer carefully scrutinized the choice. If it did not meet with approval, the vendor threw it back in the basket, reached in and by hand drew out another. If it passed muster, he quickly beheaded it, skinned it and wrapped it in paper. The vendor and the buyers exchanged money and merchandise, bowed and parted (handling snakes properly clearly takes practice).

I don't think many snakes are eaten by people in the United States, but sometimes rattlesnake does find its way on to a menu. I think when it does, it is treated as more of an exotic taste adventure than a diet staple.

It is often said that "it is better to let sleeping dogs lie," presumably to avoid the risk that it will wake up and bite you. Following that logic, it may also be better to let basking snakes bask. One morning, years ago, I ventured into my front yard and noticed a 2-foot, chocolate brown "Gopher" snake stretched out in the cul-de-sac in exactly the right place to be run over by the next car to make the loop on our street. My duty was clear. I would rescue this useful creature, take it to some remote place and release it so it could go on controlling the rodent population in Southwest Riverside County.

I am fond of wildlife videos and have witnessed many times how to safely capture a snake. So I found a tree branch, trimmed a fork on the end, pinned the reptile to the road, quickly grabbed it behind its head between the thumb and forefinger of my right hand and removed the branch. Two things happened instantly and simultaneously. The snake twisted his head to the left and buried his fangs in the tip of my thumb and whipped his body around my arm and bore down at both points. My first reaction was to check its tail to see if I overlooked any rattles. Next, I loudly admonished the viper about its behavior. It had no effect.

Locked together in this fashion, I decided to follow my relocation plan. I would drive the ungrateful creature to its new territory, pry it loose and bid it farewell (one should plan well when contemplating the capture of a snake). Naturally, my car keys were in my right hand pocket. Try removing keys from your right pocket with your left hand

and you get an idea of what that was like. Then, once inside the car, reach around the steering column with your left hand, insert the key and start the car. By the time all this was accomplished, my regard for the reptilian world had reached a new low.

In those years, there were lots of open spaces in Canyon Lake. I chose one, then pulled, pried and coaxed this persistent appendage from my arm and watched it slither away in the grass and leaves. The fang marks on the tip of my thumb healed, turned brown and remained for several years.

It was just a short while ago, at the reptile seminar, that I learned that my aggressive little friend was not a plain Gopher snake, but probably a Rosy Boa. The other thing I learned was that when encountering snakes of any kind in Canyon Lake, or anywhere, it's best to look and let them alone – or, if they must be handled, call the experts. This is especially true if one end of it rattles.

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