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Top Stories

A creature with bite Foothills is home to venomous rattlesnakes

By: Michelle Miller, Journal Staff Writer Friday, July 29, 2005 5:29 AM PDT

Editor's Note: This is the fifth in an eight-part series on creature encounters in the foothills.



Len Ramirez of Ramirez Rattlesnake Removal is busy this summer catching the venomous snakes and removing them from around foothills homes. Photo by Karina Williams/Auburn Journal

Sam Ballard's mind was going over everything he had to do before heading out to Party in the Park in May - laundry, gardening, a shower.

But something popped up that wasn't on his to-do list: Getting bit by a rattlesnake.

When he stepped out of his car, he almost stepped on a 10-inch diamondback rattlesnake.

"I thought, 'I don't have time for you today,'" said Ballard, 51. "My policy is I do not kill snakes. I hate handling them, but I can't have them around my house."

He often finds the snakes around his Meadow Vista home and planned on catching the serpent and putting it in a bucket to deal with later.

Things didn't go according to plan.

Ballard used a stick to lift its head and then attempted to grab the rattler behind the head when it sunk one of its fangs into his finger.

A former Green Beret, Ballard was trained in the dangers of rattlers. Although he was in pain, he thought he could withstand making it to the military hospital at Mather field - 1 1/2 hours away. He obeyed the speed limit all the way there, he added.

He also took his attacker along with him, in a 5-gallon paint bucket - which understandably caused some tumult in the emergency room.

"When they got my blood test back, they said I was bleeding out," he said. "They told me they were afraid they were losing me and did I have any last requests."

Ballard lost 80 percent of his red blood cells, had to get a blood transfusion and remained in the intensive-care unit for two days.

Even as authorities came to destroy the snake, Ballard defended its life. He made sure it went to Sacramento Animal Control and their "catch and release" program.

"It was quite an adventure," he said. "But I'm the one that picked up the damn snake."

Ramirez Rattlesnake Removal services has become so busy this summer, owner Len Ramirez's wife has left her accounting job to work for him. He was heading out on a three-day rattlesnake wrangling tour in the Napa area Wednesday.

This summer, he's pulled eight snakes out from underneath a single Penn Valley home. When one snake made its way into a Grass Valley house, the homeowner masked the bottom of the door so it couldn't escape from a room.

A pony was killed and he's heard of at least two people in the area who were bitten.

Nobody is exempt when it comes to rattlesnakes in the foothills, he said. They're everywhere.

"Development pushes all the wildlife out so they scatter in concealed areas, underneath shrubs, bushes and sometimes you find them right around your door entry," Ramirez said. "They're landlocked."

There are some typical scenarios leading to rattlesnake bites. Gardeners kneeling low to the ground who aren't paying attention to where their hands are going, or hikers who are making their way down to the river and not looking where they place their feet.

Some 800 rattlesnake bites are reported in California annually, resulting in one to two deaths.

Sutter Auburn Faith Hospital officials say if you are bitten, seek medical attention immediately. It is always best to go to the nearest hospital. If for some reason the antivenin is not in stock, medical personnel can retrieve some from a sister hospital.

Ramirez recommends residents take precautions in the foothills with safety inspections around their property, especially if it's where children play, and by having dogs vaccinated against rattlesnake venom.

The snakes do have a purpose in keeping rodent populations down. When he captures a serpent, Ramirez releases it in an undisclosed location, far away from people.

"They're totally valuable. Problems with chipmunks carrying bubonic plague or mice with the hantavirus, they do a good job," he said. "It's just difficult to tolerate them around our homes, schools and workplaces."

While the often-misunderstood reptiles have failed to find a place in most people's hearts, they will continue to find a place to live right near you.

"People are fearful, otherwise they wouldn't be calling us," Ramirez said. "Behind the glass people can handle them, but where you're on its terms, it's a little different."

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