



DANCING WITH SNAKES

Slowly weaving our way, half-crouched, from sagebrush to sagebrush for more than a half-mile, a slight burn cut into our upper thighs. My son and I were trying to blend into the landscape, not to be seen by the pronghorn in the coulee below the knoll. Hunting pronghorn is always a matter of stealth due to their exceptional sight estimated to be equivalent to eight to ten power binoculars. Crouching, squatting, crawling, stalking, melting into sagebrush, the bite of cactus piercing through the side of a light-weight boot or into a knee is part of the hunt - it is expected.

What was not expected, at least for us having hunted this general area for six-years, is what occurred next. Was that a buzzing insect just a foot or two from my knee, a hopper? The dance began - in concert - we both bolted upright, gingerly stepping to the left as if walking on hot coals, a rattler!

Half-a-dozen times that day we did the dance and with three others we gave a wide swath to a coiled prairie rattlesnake, the only venomous snake in Montana. An 8-inch juvenile with the circumference of a pencil gave us a start, too; it was mid-October - shouldn't the little buzzworm be bigger. What was going on? We had never experienced this before, we had never even seen a snake in this area before and yet after covering three or four sections of land over the course of the day, we continued to occasionally hear a buzz in the sagebrush steppe.

Earlier in the year coinciding with the opening of the September 1 upland bird season in Montana, I heard several reports of bird hunter's and their dogs doing the dance, a few dogs sadly taking a lethal hit. One story is recanted here by an MWF staffer, Larry Copenhaver.

"When I hear stories about not fishing certain streams or hunt areas because of the rattlesnakes, they become my destination knowing the pressure will be light and rarely, if ever, will I see any rattlesnakes. However, I do respect poisonous snakes and enrolled my German Wirehair Pointer, Archie, in a rattlesnake avoidance training program. The program technique employs a live defanged rattler in conjunction with an excessive, negative stimulus to the dog from an electronic collar. After completing the course, I remained confident that my penchant for early season hunting the high plains for sharp-tailed grouse and Hungarian partridge was a safe venture."

"Choosing a Block Management area not far from Helena, Archie pointed and retrieved hun's all day. I bagged my limit of eight, shooting 75 percent success, unbelievable for me! During a second visit - my luck changed. Mediocre shooting and my hunting partner's dog encountering her first porcupine were the day's highlights. Then, Archie entered some buckbrush as we were returning to the truck. Archie was obscured by the brush when a tremendous commotion ensued that I presumed involved a raccoon, it lasted so long. When he appeared holding up his swollen leg, I discovered two punctures and knew what he was wrestling with in the brush; evidently he tried to kill the snake instead of escaping."

"My hunt partner's foresight to bring Benadryl helped alleviate the associated swelling as we rushed back to town, Archie crying at my feet during what now became a very long trip. My vet assured me that the standard care for snakebites in the clinic is effective, losing very few pets. So began Archie's treatment with intravenous antibiotics and antihistamines."

"Archie survived the first night. I returned to the vet after the second night, confident I could take him home, but the news was bad. That night, a clinic associate had entered the darkened room where Archie was kenneled for an emergency surgery on another animal. Archie reacted, barking defensively. Twenty-minutes later, when he was checked - he had died - victim of a venom-induced blood clot that became dislodged in the excitement. I will never know if a newly developed, pre-season rattlesnake vaccine would have saved him."

"As a postscript, I now have another dog, my joyous little "fat-girl", a Wirehaired Pointing Griffon named Tess. Her first hunting trip this season, not far from Helena, was to a section of state land where she scented her first Huns. Just six-feet from the front bumper she shied away from something in deep grass, we both had nearly stepped on a rattler. The snake was sluggish from the early morning cool air - thank goodness."

Rattlesnake Encounters

Most hunters and anglers heading afield are ill-prepared for a rattlesnake encounter or give it a second thought. With hunting seasons nearly in full swing, and MWF hearing of more and more hunter rattlesnake contact, this article strays from our customary issue focus in Montana Wildlife and instead offers heedful information for those heading out this fall.

Rattlesnake bites are extremely rare and rarer yet, lethal, except for bird hunting dogs; it is estimated that about one-third are dry bites. Baby rattlesnakes are not more venomous than the adults are. The venom has the same toxicity on a drop for drop basis. The “striking distance” of a prairie rattler is commonly believed to be one third to one half of the snakes’ body length. With its distinctive diamond shaped head, the prairie rattlesnake thrives east of the Rocky Mountains in Montana; it is a sub-species of the western rattler.

A female bears live young in August or September, sometimes in early October, so don’t be surprised to see juveniles, depending on temperatures, while hunting in October. Rattlesnakes are cold blooded and unable to control their internal body temperatures. They seek places where temperatures are at tolerable levels, generally between 65 degrees F and 85 degrees F and during the early fall, when hunters are afield, may frequently be found sunning near sagebrush or on rock outcrops to warm up. Until temperatures consistently dip low enough to trigger hibernation (hibernacula), be snake aware in grass and shrublands adjacent or intermixed with arid, dry, rocky outcrops or near prairie dog towns. South-facing slopes along rocky shorelines, and especially in the semi-arid and arid terrains with eroded canyons, ravines, sandy cliffs, and badlands scarps in central and eastern Montana are where most people run into prairie rattlers. During the heat of a warm October day, rattlesnakes can often be found curled up under sagebrush or, in Larry’ case, buckbrush; both are also favorite hideouts for several species of upland birds – bird hunters beware. Rattlesnake bites can kill dogs, and if not, they are known to cause serious muscle, liver and neurological damage.

If the fall is particularly warm, bird hunters with dogs need to be prepared. Diphenhydramine or Benadryl is an antihistamine and it is used for acute inflammatory and allergic conditions. It may cause drowsiness in animals just as it does in people and is helpful as a mild tranquilizer. The everyday, plain Benadryl is the number one item you should pack in your dog first-aid kit as an emergency measure to help control swelling, pain, increased heart rate, and low blood pressure resulting from a snake bite as you quickly head to the nearest veterinarian. Minutes count!

Contact your vet for the correct dosage for your four-legged hunting companion.

While still somewhat controversial, and some dogs react adversely to the newly developed rattlesnake vaccine, it is considerably safer than going without and generally speaking, dogs will have much less severe reactions to the snake venom if vaccinated. Even if a vaccinated dog is bitten, the situation should be treated as an emergency and the animal should receive veterinarian care immediately. The vaccine prods the development of protective antibodies so that if a dog receives a “wet bite” the vaccine starts neutralizing the venom immediately.

Rattlesnake avoidance or snake “breaking” training for hunting dogs is fast becoming the prevention effort of choice.

As far as the hunter, rattlesnake bites are seldom fatal. Nevertheless, the victim should remain as calm as possible and avoid physical exertion and panic, it will only cause the venom to move through the body more quickly. However, and contrary to rumor, rattlesnake venom does not “travel through the blood straight to the heart.” Instead, the venom causes a breakdown of the capillary walls creating internal bleeding.

First aid treatment is debated and there are many myths and homespun responses that could cause more damage than good. Most doctors will advise that tourniquets or restriction bandages are not only unnecessary, but that they could do more harm than good by increasing blood pressure which increases internal bleeding. The oral sucking of venom from the wound is said by some to be a risky treatment. It’s cautioned that attempting to orally suck out the venom is “dangerous especially if any open wounds are present in the rescuer’s mouth--while the venom is harmless if ingested, you don’t want it in your blood”. There are mechanical, extraction devices on the market and in many snake bite kits that will pull part of the venom from a wound and thereby, mitigate the impacts until reaching medical treatment. What is most widely agreed upon is that “for absolutely no reason should the wound be opened with a knife or probed by any other instrument – the “cut and suck” response is out! Do not use older snake bite kits such as those containing razor blades and suction bulbs - they may do severe damage.

Other **Do Not** suggestions include the following:

- ◆Apply cold packs or ice to the skin; it will not slow the spread of the venom.
- ◆Consume alcohol, caffeine, aspirin or anything by mouth.
- ◆Do not bathe the wound in water.

- ♦Attempt to catch the snake or bring it into the hospital.
- ♦Don't elevate the wound above the victim's heart.

Some suggested Recommendations:

- ♦Make a mental note of the time; this will be helpful for medical treatment.
- ♦Move the victim away from the snakes striking distance to prevent any further bites.
- ♦Keep the victim down, still and calm. For dogs, when possible, carry them back to your vehicle or wrap them in a garment and drag them or have your hunting companion go for help.
- ♦Remove all restrictive clothing or jewelry. In the case of a hunting dog, if its collar is tight – remove it. You can create a loose splint to help restrict movement of the bite area but do not restrict the blood flow.
- ♦Keep the wounded area lower than heart level, but do not allow it to hang.
- ♦Transport victim to the nearest medical facility, doctor, hospital, veterinarian, or poison treatment center.
- ♦Call 911. Carry the number of your veterinarian or an area facility with you.
- ♦If possible, call ahead to the emergency room or doctor so that antivenin can be ready upon arrival.
- ♦If your way out is in the sticks and far from medical treatments don't be averse to knocking on a door, explaining the circumstances, lay down the victim, and ask to use a telephone.
- ♦You may also call the National Poison Control Center (1-800-222-1222). The center can be called from anywhere in the United States. This national hotline number will let you talk to experts in poisoning. They will give you free - 24 hours a day, 7 days a week - instructions.

Hunting with thick-leathered, stout, high on the calf leather boots or wearing "snake gators" or "chaps" may prevent an unpleasant experience. Checking foot wear before use, if left outside while camping and sleeping bags are also good preventative measures.

Hunters - Montana is rattlesnake country – be snake aware. This article is informational only and not intended as medical advice. Please contact your veterinarian for more information on the risks and treatments for hunting dogs and your physician for medical advice.