

By EYNC Naturalist Hannah Steurer



EYNC Naturalist Hannah Steurer. Photo by Mary Lou Flint.

We do have rattlesnakes in our Nature Study Area. If you encounter one, please do not harm it! Rattlesnakes fill an important ecological niche by consuming a variety of rodents including rats, baby ground squirrels, gophers, and moles. Moving up the food chain, rattlesnakes are eaten by predators such as bobcats, coyotes, birds of prey, and kingsnakes.

If you hear a rattle, remain calm and follow the “3 Ls”—**Listen** for the rattle sound, **Locate** where the snake is, then slowly **Leave** the area to put distance between you and the rattlesnake. The snake will move away to avoid confrontation when it has the space to do so. If it feels threatened or is provoked, it is more likely to strike.

Rattlesnakes are the only native venomous snake species found in most of California. (The only other venomous species is the yellow-bellied sea snake, which is rarely seen and only in southernmost California.) Rattlesnakes are a type of pit viper and can be identified by the rattle at the end of their tail as well as their large, triangular head, which contains the venom glands. Non-venomous snakes in California have a slender head about the same width as the body. Rattlesnakes are most active during the warmer months. In winter they brumate, or hibernate, underground in holes and burrows dug by small mammals.

Rattlesnakes are ovoviviparous, meaning their eggs hatch inside of mothers, so they appear to give live birth. Babies are born from August to October and stay with their mother for the first couple of weeks, hidden in a nest in a hole or protected area before venturing out on their own. Newborn rattlesnakes don't make rattle sounds. They are born with a single “birth button” at the end of their tail and gain more segments or “buttons” of their rattle each time they shed their skin. Thus, they are incapable of giving a warning rattle until after they have shed a few times, which could be several months from time of birth.

There is a common myth that baby rattlesnakes are more venomous or dangerous than adults. In fact, adults can have 20 to 50 times more venom than babies depending on age. However, the babies are still learning to control their venom,

so their bites are more likely to lead to envenomation. Rattlesnakes use their venom to catch prey, so when forced to use it in defense (rather than for capturing prey), they are unable to eat for several days to weeks until that venom is replenished. Adult snakes learn to ration their venom. According to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, adult rattlesnakes give a dry bite with no venom about 25 to 50% of the time when biting humans. Always seek immediate medical attention if you are bitten.

For more information about rattlesnakes at Effie Yeaw Nature Center (EYNC), read the articles by Mike Cardwell in the Spring 2020 The Acorn and on his web site at eyncrattlesnakes.com.



EYNC Animal Ambassador Natoma, a Northern Pacific rattlesnake, showing her rattle and large, triangular head. Photo © Hannah Steurer.



Baby rattlesnake showing button on tail. Photo © Gary Nafis, Californiaherps.com

Hannah Steurer has been a Naturalist at Effie Yeaw for 3 years, but she has been visiting the Nature Center since she was a small child accompanying her father on birding hikes. She grew up between Rancho Cordova and Elk Grove and earned a Bachelor's degree in Anthropology/Archaeology from California State University, Sacramento in 2017. At Effie Yeaw she loves sharing nature with visitors of all ages, especially with hands-on activities. She has a special soft spot for EYNC's "Nature of Reading" program for young children, which she helped revive in 2022. (See the article in the [Winter 2022 Acorn](#)).

