

Rattlesnake Roundup

Do you really need a rattlesnakeskin wallet?

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Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake

Last week I helped my friend, Jack, move from Georgia to Southern California, pulling a trailer while driving nearly 2,200 miles along Interstate 40, with some detours onto the "Mother Road," Route 66. It was a fun road trip and we saw some cool stuff along the way. Nostalgic type that I am, I was especially interested in any remaining old Route 66 attractions, such as the Leaning Tower of Texas, Delgadillo's Snow Cap Drive-In, the Cadillac Ranch (although that one we missed because we drove by at night, and the caddies aren't lit up), the Jackrabbit Trading Post, the Wigwam Motel and many other old, sometimes shuttered and abandoned, motels along the route.

"Trading posts" were a common feature of the landscape during our journey. Dozens of billboards worked to entice travelers off the interstate and into their parking lots with promises of all manner of merchandise, from moccasins and fudge to pottery and chunks of petrified wood.

We stopped at several of these stores, often to take the opportunity to walk Mars, Jack's lab mix who was accompanying us. Jack was the designated driver, I was the designated navigator and Mars was the designated dozer. I know dogs spend a lot of time sleeping, but Mars was a marvel. He must have slept through 80 percent of the trip, stretched out on the back seat of Jack's truck. Sometimes a passing 18-wheeler would wake him up, and he'd sit up to gaze out at the passing landscape briefly before returning to slumberland once again.

The insides of the trading posts and the merchandise they were selling were pretty comparable to each other. In addition to fake tomahawks, T-shirts, toothpick holders, shot glasses and tons of other kitschy stuff, there was always the rattlesnake counter, featuring myriad items made from rattlesnake parts. You could get wallets and belts; necklaces, keychains and other trinkets with rattlesnake rattles hanging off them; hatbands; mounted skins and stuffed rattlesnakes posed in a coiled, threatening posture with mouth agape. Many of the stores sold these products, but I only saw one that included a live rattlesnake on display ("Poisonous!" a sign warned). Poison or Venom>>

I have trouble seeing this kind of thing. On the one hand, I'm sometimes tempted to buy a snakeskin wallet or something like that. On the other, I don't like snakes being hunted in order to supply product manufacturers with the necessary skins and rattles. And especially if such merchandise is the byproduct of rattlesnake roundups, then I'm very much against their sale. Wholesale slaughter of rattlesnakes is happening due to rattlesnake roundups. [Click image to enlarge](#)

Rattlesnake products were for sale in every trading post I visited. Rattlers weren't the only dead animals for sale. Stuffed armadillos were common, too. This old sign was on display in the Route 66 Museum in Clinton, Oklahoma.

From early in the year to about mid-summer, rattlesnake roundups pop up in Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and a few other states. These are big festival-like gatherings, with music, food and entertainment. Handling presentations and educational exhibits are often featured, as well. The roundups are typically staged as fundraising events by any number of organizations. One that calls itself the world's biggest, the Sweetwater (Texas) roundup, is sponsored by the Sweetwater Jaycees.

Thousands of rattlesnakes are pulled from nature to be used at rattlesnake roundups, with hunters sometimes employing particularly sadistic methods when raiding rattlesnake dens. Gasoline may be poured into a den's entrance, and when the startled snakes inside emerge they are snatched and bagged. Hunters may begin their search long before the actual roundup, gathering up many snakes and keeping them in deplorable conditions until they are sold to the roundup organizers. Later, all the snakes are killed during the course of the roundups. Some may die due to abuse (allegations that are refuted by roundup officials), or during demonstrations at the events, including some that may involve a snake's head being chopped off, or a snake being skinned. Rattlesnake meat is of course the main menu item at a rattlesnake roundup, and at the end of the event any remaining snakes are often sold to vendors who use them to manufacture any number of products, including belts, wallets and other products like those that I saw during my road trip.

Debate rages on over these controversial events. Rattlesnake roundup organizers say they're keeping rattlesnake populations in check, helping protect people and livestock while at the same time teaching the public about the snakes. They maintain that the snakes are not abused in any way. While it may be true that some roundups are less sensationalistic than others that stage daredevil shows in which snakes may be mistreated, conservationists and others, including reptile lovers, worry that the snakes are hunted for roundups to such a degree that their numbers are being sorely depleted. Of special concern is the effect on the eastern diamondback rattlesnake (*Crotalus adamanteus*), wild populations of which have already been suffering for years.

Personally, I despise the fact that so many snakes are killed for this purpose, and it is one of the rare times I share the opinion of the Humane Society of the United States, which of course also hates rattlesnake roundups. Why is it necessary for thousands of snakes to die needlessly for the sake of "entertainment?" Isn't there some other way to stage a fundraiser? With all the concern for the environment these days, and green initiatives becoming increasingly commonplace, maybe someone in power will crack down on the rattlesnake roundups someday. Arguments rage on as to whether or not the roundups really do have an adverse effect on wild snake populations, but like it or lump it, they have been around for many years, they are financially successful for the communities that stage them, and they're probably not going to be going away anytime soon.

Remember this the next time you see a rattlesnakeskin wallet or a belt for sale. By not purchasing these things, you'll be doing your part to lessen the demand for them. I don't know if this would help put a stop to the rattlesnake roundups, but it couldn't hurt. For now, my preferred "rattlesnake item" will continue to be an envelope of "rattlesnake eggs" (a washer on a rubber band that "buzzes" when you open the envelope). Luckily, these, too, are readily available at trading posts along Interstate 40.

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