

## Poor Snakes

**By Russ Case**

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Red Diamond Rattlesnake (*Crotalus ruber*). I would never mock someone for not knowing about reptiles or amphibians. If you're not into them, you're not into them. But what frustrates me is when people assume the worst about them, and buy into myths about them, and go out of their way to hurt them.

Especially snakes. Snakes have been maligned for so long, and for no good reason. The media, of course, jumps all over any story that may pop up on the newswire that concerns a snake "terrorizing" somebody. On my way to work this morning one of the guys on the morning radio show I listen to (to anyone who's familiar, I'm talking about the Mark and Brian show) related an incident about a man in Vietnam who sat on his toilet only to end up bitten in an area a guy really would never want to be bitten, by a snake that was coiled inside the toilet bowl. From the description (yellow and black) and the fact that Mark reported that it was a type of rat snake, I assume it may have been a mandarin rat snake.

On the surface this story might amuse people. Other people might consider it a nightmare come true. But no matter how you slice it, this incident doesn't portray the innocent snake in a favorable light, and once again we have a tale of a snake/human encounter that is less than pleasant: snake = bite.

Years ago I was hiking in the local mountains with a friend. We were in rattlesnake territory, and sure enough I spotted one on the trail ahead of us. It was coiled right in the middle of the trail, as a matter of fact. As we got closer I was excited to see that it was a beautiful red diamond rattlesnake (*Crotalus ruber*), about 3 or 4 feet long. Unfortunately, as I moved closer for inspection it became apparent that the snake was dead. Someone had killed it -- the head was damaged -- and coiled its body on the trail, presumably to startle other hikers in the area (the trail was a popular one).

I was ticked off. And a little farther along the trail I came upon the knucklehead who had killed it. He was telling some other hikers about the encounter. When I asked him why he killed it he said it wouldn't get out of his way on the trail. Yeah, right. If you know anything about snakes you know that a snake's number one priority is to get out of a person's way. They will not chase you and unless they're cornered and forced to defend themselves they will not attack you. My guess is this goof got the drop on the snake and thought it would be cool to kill it.

Ignorance like this is scary, especially when there are groups constantly snapping at the heels of reptile hobbyists and trying to hamper their ability to keep pet reptiles. That's why it's so great when you see someone's eyes light up at a pet expo, reptile swap meet, etc. when they're face to face with some of these amazing animals.

The media is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, via shows on Animal Planet, Discovery Channel and others, it can help to popularize herps and illustrate how fascinating they are. On the other, there are the news outlets that slobber at the chance to sensationalize stories that involve snakes, whether they're reporting on a snake in a Vietnamese toilet or pythons in the Everglades.

Always try to educate people about the truth: that snakes are beautiful, peaceful creatures that deserve our respect and admiration. The Earth would be a less interesting planet to inhabit if they weren't a part of it.

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