



SOUTHERN PACIFIC RATTLESNAKE

Crotalus oreganus helleri

POPULATION STATUS

N Not Threatened



CONSERVATION

- This species is crucial to the survival of humans because they provide natural pest abatement by keeping rodent populations in check, thus protecting human food (grain) supplies along with many species of wild flora and fauna. Although the southern pacific rattlesnake is not considered threatened or endangered by either the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) or California Department of Fish and Wildlife, they are faced with some conservation concerns. Road construction, loss of suitable habitat and prey density have all played a role in the decline of this species in the past decades. Many people fear snakes and work to eradicate them, but the benefit to humans far outweighs the perceived danger. Help these snakes and others by allowing them to co-exist with us.



SCIENTIFIC NAME

Crotalus oreganus helleri

RANGE

Southwestern California to northwestern Baja California, and Santa Cruz and Santa Catalina Islands

HABITAT

Seaside dunes, to desert scrub, grassy plains, rocky hillsides, chaparral, open woodlands, and agricultural areas

DESCRIPTION

A large rattlesnake with a triangular head, a thick body and short tail. The scales are colored dark brown, dark black or dark olive-green with large, dark-rimmed spots of brown, olive, tan, grey or black covering the back. The underside is pale.

AVERAGE SIZE

Length: 30 to 50 inches

LIFESPAN

10 – 20 years of age

DIET

Birds, lizards, snakes, frogs, insects, and small mammals, including mice, rats, rabbits, hares, and ground squirrels

INCUBATION PERIOD

90 days

CLUTCH SIZE

9 to 10 live offspring

PREDATORS

Birds of prey, coyotes, roadrunners and humans

BEHAVIOR

- Southern Pacific rattlesnakes have varied activity patterns as the seasons change.
- They are primarily nocturnal in the hottest parts of the year but change to being more crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk) or even diurnal (active in the daytime) as the weather becomes more moderate. In the cold, winter months these snakes gather together in dens underground and are not active at all. The majority of their activity is related to thermoregulation, moving from the shade to the sun to regulate their body temperatures, and finding prey.

- Radiotelemetry studies have shown that the home range of male snakes is larger than that of females and some research indicates that home ranges vary depending on prey density and availability of denning sites.

- Like many snakes, southern Pacific rattlesnakes do not eat every day, but rather on a schedule of when they are hungry. This depends on many factors including the season, age of the snake, and the size of the previous meal. Prey is found while the snake is actively moving, or by ambush, where the snake waits near lizard or rodent trails, striking at and releasing passing prey. Heat pits on the side of the jaw allow them to home in on the warm-blooded prey they are most in search of and track them after they have been bitten. The animal will scurry off after the encounter and the snake then follows the trail of the envenomated animal and swallows it whole.

REPRODUCTION AND BREEDING

- Adult male rattlesnakes engage in ritual “Combat Dancing” during the spring breeding season, although it is frequently seen at other times as well. Throughout much of history this activity was presumed to be a mating male and female instead of two competing males. Despite the common name, it is not combat as neither male is injured. Nor is it an actual dance. Researchers now believe it is essentially a wrestling match in which necks and forebodies are intertwined, with the stronger snake slamming the smaller one to the ground until the weaker snake leaves the area. Most bouts end in a draw.

- Rattlesnakes are ovoviviparous or live-bearing snakes, where the mother keeps the fertilized eggs inside her body and gives birth to living young. Mating typically occurs in the spring with males searching extensively for females to mate with. Breeding occurs annually and occurs between August and October in the wild. Post mating, the male and female go their separate ways and have no further contact.

- The neonates are about 10 inches in length when born and have a bright yellow tail and not rattle – just a single button that doesn’t make any sound. They receive no parental care from either parent, instead relying on instinct to survive. They will remain in the area where they were born for about two weeks when they have their first molt and they begin forming their first rattle.

AMAZING FACTS

- A new rattle segment is added each time the skin is shed, which can be more than one time per year. The rattle is simply made up of segments of keratin.

- The venom of the southern Pacific rattlesnake includes two types of toxins that affect both the blood stream and the nervous system.