

Safety Note #77

## FIELDWORK SAFETY: POISONOUS SNAKEBITES



*Southern Pacific Rattlesnake*

*Photograph Courtesy of Hopland REC*

Poisonous snakes occur throughout California and are restricted to six species of rattlesnake: namely the Sidewinder, Speckled Rattlesnake, Red Diamond Rattlesnake, Southern Pacific Rattlesnake (also called Western Rattlesnake), Western Diamondback Rattlesnake, and Mojave Rattlesnake. There are about 7,000 to 8,000 poisonous snakebites annually in the United States. Of this total, 8 to 10 of the poisonous snakebites result in fatalities. Most snakebites occur on the limbs with the greatest percentage on the arms, hands, or fingers. About 30 percent of all snakebites occur while the snake is being purposefully handled.

The following fieldwork precautions and actions are recommended to prevent and if necessary, treat poisonous snakebites:

- Avoid performing fieldwork that involves walking or hiking alone. Work with a partner in areas where poisonous snakes are prevalent.
- Always wear sturdy hiking boots when performing fieldwork. Do not wear sandals or sneakers.
- Avoid heavy underbrush where you cannot see what is in front of you. Stick to existing trails. When heavy underbrush is unavoidable, use a walking stick to first probe and rustle brush and grass that you intend to traverse.
- Learn to recognize the poisonous snakes in the fieldwork area by studying a reptile field guide or other similar snake identification materials.
- Be aware that rattlesnakes do not always shake their rattles before striking.
- Closely look for snakes before placing your hands on objects such as rock outcrops or trees or picking up objects from the ground (i.e. rocks, plants, leaves, remote monitoring equipment, etc.)
- Thoroughly inspect the area where you intend to sit, particularly around stumps, logs, boulders, or rock outcrops.
- Carefully examine the ground before crossing over or under fences and across logs and boulders.
- Never approach, tease, corner, or poke at any snake. If you encounter a rattlesnake, remain calm and back away slowly. Always give snakes plenty of room to escape from you.
- Consider baby poisonous snakes to be as venomous as fully grown poisonous snakes.
- Do not handle recently killed snakes. Although dead, a delayed nervous system reaction by the snake may cause it to bite.
- If a snakebite occurs: Calm the victim, wash the area of the bite with soap and water, apply a cold dressing over the bite area, and immediately transport the victim to the closest medical facility for professional treatment. Also, remove jewelry, watches, and tight clothing in preparation for tissue swelling.
- The US Food and Drug Administration and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have recommended that poisonous snakebite treatments not include tourniquets, application of ice to the wound, or incisions to the snakebite with attempts to suck venom out of the affected area. For these reasons, snakebite kits are not considered an appropriate or effective tool for poisonous snakebite treatment.