

the **tales** of the

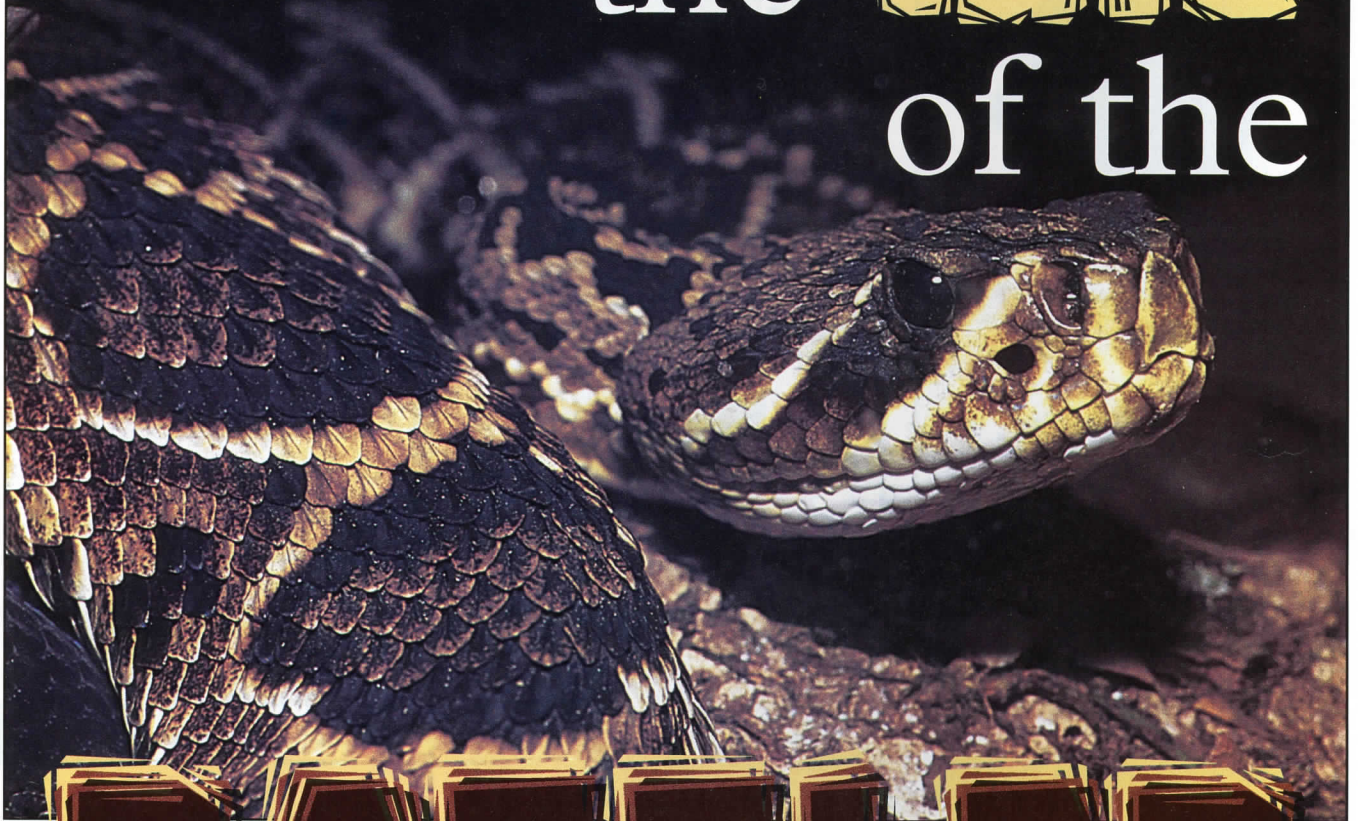


PHOTO BY RD BARTLETT

RATTLER

By Cindy Lowe

Its distinctive *whirring noise*, sounding like
“a far-off **CaCophony** of **dry** castor beans”

— according to Florida author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings—
is a warning to all in a rattlesnake’s path: “Leave me alone or suffer the consequences.”

The rattle, a keratinous appendage of hollow, loosely-connected segments on the snake’s tail, is the most evident characteristic which differentiates the rattlesnake from its venomous and non-venomous cousins belonging to the 2,700 species of snakes worldwide.

Rattlers are uniquely native to the New World, especially the United States and Mexico. In fact, one of the early American flags bore the image of the rattlesnake with the inscription “Don’t Tread on Me.”

Of the 15 kinds of rattlesnakes on the U.S. mainland, three live in Florida.

The dusky pygmy is the smallest at only 15 to 22 inches long, with a record length of 31 inches. It eats, correspondingly,

small prey such as small rodents, lizards, frogs and insects.

Also called the ground rattler, this hot-tempered little snake is responsible for more venomous snake bites than any other Florida poisonous snake— perhaps trying to compensate for its tiny size.

Dusky pygmies are found throughout the state, also inhabiting areas from southern South Carolina to southeast Mississippi. They not only enjoy their natural habitat of palmetto flatwoods near lakes or marshes but seem to relish an occasional adventure into new territory.

According to Dr. Julian Lee, associate professor of biology at the University of Miami, pygmies have turned up in the garden centers of Walmarts and K-marts in some South

Florida towns. It is unknown whether the snakes crawled onto the property or came in on the plants.

The canebrake, a southern subspecies of the timber rattlesnake, makes its home from southeast Virginia west to central Texas, but only as far south as northern Florida. It prefers cane thickets and swamplands.

It is, generally, a rat and mouse eater, but has been known to feed on squirrels, chipmunks, small rabbits and birds. The granddaddies of this species may reach six feet in length, though the average is about three and a half feet.

Probably the most well-known of our rattlers is the biggest, not only in Florida but in the entire country—the eastern diamondback. Living in the southeastern states, it is usually four to four and a half feet but has been recorded to be as long as eight feet in length.

As with any feared creature, claims have been made by people who declare that they have seen huge rattlers in excess of eight feet.

As Gatorland herpetologist Tim Williams points out, “Records are those things that are officially recorded.” Though it may be possible that some have grown longer, the evidence of those monster-rattler sightings always seems to slither away before it can be measured.

The eastern diamondbacks favor flatwoods of oaks and pines and palmetto hammocks. They like to rest in tight cubby holes such as burrows made by small mammals or gopher tortoises. They either seek out or ambush their prey of rats, squirrels, rabbits and quail.

Many a Florida cracker who has ever lived in rural parts of the state must surely have a story to tell of this critter Rawlings called the “old man of the woods.”

Rattlers and their venomous bites are many times attributed with super powers. Tall tales have been stretched even longer than the longest rattlesnakes found in Florida.

One such story says the striking fangs of a rattler flattened an automobile tire, causing the fangs to break on impact. The garage mechanic, running his hand across the tread to find the

cause of the flat, was unknowingly scratched by the poisonous protrusions. As a result, he reportedly died the next day without any apparent reason.

Snakes have been cast as venomous villains ever since Eve’s encounter with the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

“Snakes are persecuted just because they’re snakes,” Williams said, speaking up for the reticent reptiles.

Even Rawlings, in her classic novel, *The Yearling*, blames an old rattler for the orphanhood of an innocent fawn: “After the snake bit Penny, he shot a doe deer in hopes that by applying her innards to his wound, it would draw out the snake’s poison. His son Jody then sadly discovered the motherless fawn hidden in the brush.”

Williams, a 20-year veteran of her-

He milked the rattler as dry as he could, and before the snake had a chance to produce more venom, he agitated the old varmint and thrust his arm under the grapevine to receive the painful, but well-paid-for, snakebite. The scene was shot successfully.

Rawlings’ snake-bitten character, Penny Baxter, slashed at the twin punctures on his arm. Pressing the fresh deer liver and then the heart to the wound, he said, “I kin feel it draw.”

But, Williams said this and the other cracker ‘cures’ for snakebites, such as using a raw onion poultice or ingesting and applying pure olive oil, were useless.

Truly, one of the most popular remedies did more harm than good. *The Yearling*’s Doc Wilson, who treated Penny, wished for some whiskey for his patient, as well as for himself. To his lament, none was to be had.

Later, it was proven that alcohol may actually increase the effects of the bite by speeding up the circulation of the blood.

Folklore is fascinating. Though it propagates the fear of rattlesnakes, it embraces as powerful medicine the very creature for which it holds such antipathy.

Believed as gospel truth, folk medicine taught that the use of certain parts of the rattlesnake’s anatomy would heal some serious ailments.

The prescription for fever and chills might be a rattler-bone necklace, which was also said to cure epilepsy, or rattler gall mixed with clay, which was also a medicine for small pox. Carrying or wearing a string of rattles was believed to prevent or cure such diseases as rheumatism, small pox, ‘fits’ and sunstroke and would soothe and pacify teething children. And what traveling medicine show was complete without rattlesnake oil to cure ‘what ails ya’?

Now, modern medicine is finding actual good in the old rattler. By extracting the venom, or ‘milking’ a snake, science is able to produce antivenin to counteract the destructive effects of a poisonous snakebite.

Antivenin is made by inoculating large animals, usually horses, with venom and using the blood serum con-



Canebrake

PHOTO BY RD BARTLETT

petology, worked for a four- to five-year period with one of Florida’s foremost ‘herpers,’ Ross Allen, who for many years had a reptile exhibit at Silver Springs. Allen told him some amusing and amazing stories about snakes.

During the filming of *The Yearling*, released in 1945, Allen worked as the rattlesnake consultant. In the scene in which Gregory Peck’s character was bitten by the rattler, an attempt at using an artificial arm as the recipient of the rattlesnake’s strike just wasn’t convincing enough.

Allen proclaimed the scene needed a real human arm. The filmmakers’ reply was to the effect of ‘who in his right mind would do such a fool thing?’ Allen said he would do it, for \$500. “That was a lot of money in those days,” he told Williams.

taining antibodies in treatment.

Wyeth-Ayerst Laboratories is the sole producer of antivenin in the United States for coral snakes and pit vipers, which includes rattlesnakes, said Dick Fearnow of Lakeland, a representative of the Philadelphia-based company.

However, antivenin is not freely administered to just anyone bitten by a snake.

"Just because it's a snake and just because it bites, doesn't mean you're going to die," Williams said. All but six of the 69 species of snakes in Florida are harmless.

Even when a venomous snake strikes, 3 to 49 percent of those bites show no symptoms of poisoning, he said. Snakes do not always inject venom.

The truth is, more people have died due to bee stings— even from attack dogs— than have from snake bites, Williams said.

Fearnow noted other reasons for the stingy use of antivenin— the high percentage of cases in which the patient has a reaction to the horse serum and the high price of treatment, at \$150 per vial times two to 15 vials, depending on the seriousness of the bite.

George Van Horn is one of only two herpetologists in the state who currently milk snakes. He said this kind of work is learned by watching and doing.

For 24 years now, he has worked with snakes at Reptile World in St. Cloud, yielding two to three kilograms of freeze-dried venom per year, which is mostly used in physiology research.

"Venom toxins are some of the most sophisticated research tools," Van Horn said. They are used in studies of cell structure, blood chemistry and disease mechanisms.

Another of the rattlesnake's contributions to the medical field is the development of the hypodermic needle, fashioned after the snake's fangs.

Rattlesnake skin, richly colored and artistically decorated, is made into apparel and is quite popular, especially in country-western wear.

Dwayne McGee, owner of Skin

Shop, U.S.A. in Waldo, tans snake skins and makes belts, buckles and hat bands. His shop processes and sells the meat and some of the organs, makes snake-bone jewelry and fang earrings and rattle and freeze-dried rattlesnake-head key chains.

McGee is quick to point out that 95 to 98 percent of the rattlesnake skins his shop uses are from road kill, from snakes killed by hunters and from people killing them in their yards.

Not only cowboys, but Indians have used rattler skin. Stretched tight over a warrior's bow, the skin gave it camouflage and kept moisture from the polished wood, said Seminole historian Swamp Owl Paul Morrison of Leesburg. And some used the diamond design in everything from clothing to pottery.



Dusky Pygmy

PHOTO BY RD BARTLETT

Unlike many other wild critters which were honored by Native Americans, most believed snakes to be accursed, he said. To repel any snakes in the area, a Seminole would carve a wing out of wood and attach it to a string, then twirl it above his head. Morrison said the snakes feared the fluttering vibrations, thinking a bird of prey was near.

Immigrants, too, disliked this snake unknown to them. Back in the 17th century in Massachusetts, a rattler extermination program was developed, later becoming an annual event. Called rattlesnake round-ups, or 'bees,' they were practiced in many states.

These hunts, purposed to rid homestead areas of snakes, became a popular sport with awards given to participants bagging the most snakes. In time, a car-

nival atmosphere surrounded the potentially dangerous round-ups to which families came with picnic lunches for a day of entertainment. Several Southern states still carry on this tradition.

Though Florida does not continue to slaughter rattlesnakes for sport, it is still a celebrated tradition in San Antonio, near Dade City. This rattlesnake festival is held annually on the third Saturday in October and features arts and crafts, food and professional rattlesnake shows.

Though some say the only good snake is a dead snake, others disagree. Williams believed snakes hold an important place in our ecology— otherwise, they wouldn't have been put on the earth. He said our planet would be overrun with rodents if snakes were

removed from the food chain. "Nature's best mouse trap is the snake," he said.

Though he preaches caution concerning venomous snakes, he encourages people to have a snake safely removed rather than killing it. "We need to learn to be good neighbors," he said. "It was their backyard before it was ours."

Experts agree the obvious obstacle in a snake's path toward propagation is their disappearing habitat. "Animals don't have the luxury of packing all their stuff in a U-Haul and moving when we come in," Williams said.

Walter Timmerman, now of Helena, Mont., began studying rattlesnakes when he lived in Florida. He said the population of eastern diamondbacks is surely declining. "We've gotten to the point where if management and conservation measures aren't taken soon, then heroic measures will have to be taken."

Paul Moler, biologist at the Wildlife Research Laboratory of the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission in Gainesville, agrees the habitat for the eastern diamondback has been lost, but he added that all wildlife faces that dilemma.

He noted that prior to World War II, the state was extensively agricultural. In the 1950s and into the early '60s, people migrated en masse to the cities, leaving

much land to lie fallow. This caused a significant increase of habitat suitable to the rattlesnake. Now, more and more of that land is being used for human habitation.

Bruce Means of the Coastal Plains Institute in Tallahassee has been working on a book about rattlesnakes for over 20 years. He said the eastern diamondback has lost more than 50 percent of its natural wilderness habitat and is now forced to live in rural areas with humans and domesticated animals.

Though some believe that eastern diamondbacks live only in sandhill habitats, which indeed have decreased, Moler said the snakes occur in virtually every dry habitat in the state. He does not feel there is an urgency concerning the population of the snake. "I see them with reasonable regularity, about 10 to 15 a year."

Timmerman said, "There's no question that we still have rattlesnakes. But we usually wait till something is irretrievably lost [to take action]."

He said that many times, once people are aware that a species is in danger, they change their minds about it and are not so eager to get rid of the critters.

Besides, "snakes aren't designed for killing people, but for gathering food," Williams said.


"The chances of being hit by lightning are more than the chances of dying from snakebite, or even being bitten," said Dr. L.H.S. Van Mierop, retired, of Gainesville. He has studied snakes and snakebites for 20 years.

In hospitals such as Shands Hospital at the University of Florida in Gainesville, he said, they see only about 20 cases per year. Whereas, most doctors will never see a case of snakebite in their entire lives. Because of this rarity, poisonous snakebites are no longer a "reportable event."

In the highly unusual case that one is bitten by a venomous snake, Van-Mierop advised against cutting oneself at the bite. Just go to a doctor or hospital.

Snakes aren't out there waiting to attack humans. Simply, people need to use common sense. Be careful around a snake's hiding places, such as piles of wood or rocks or animal burrows. Look before reaching into underbrush.

As Rawlings wrote, "A rattlesnake minds his own matters if he ain't bothered."

Williams agreed, "Anybody who has spent any time in the woods or swamps has probably walked right by a snake. You left it alone, and it left you alone. And everything was fine." 

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