

Animals of the Chihuahuan Desert

Western Diamondback Rattlesnake

Physical Characteristics

These snakes have a heavy body and large triangular-shaped head. Their colors can vary from brown to pale green and they have a dark diamond patterning along their back. Their tails are black and white striped just before the rattles. They can grow to be 3-7 feet long.



Diet

Rattlesnakes eat a diet of lizards, toads, birds, rabbits, and small rodents.

Habitat

These snakes aren't picky about where they live. They can be found in New Mexico, Arizona, Oklahoma, Texas, and northern Mexico. They live in rocky areas or in underground burrows of other animals. They are mostly active at night but do come out on cooler days. The diamondback rattlesnake enjoys resting underneath desert plants and on grassy plains. In the winter they go into caves or other places to hibernate.

Senses

The snakes have a heat sensor located behind each nostril that can tell differences in temperature. This skill helps them decide whether other animals are predators or prey.

Predators

Eagles, hawks, roadrunners, king snakes, coyote, bobcats, and foxes all eat rattlesnakes.

Interesting Facts

- Hearing a rattling sound in the desert means a rattlesnake is close by and you are in danger. This sound comes from the rattlesnake's tail which is made of keratin, the same material your fingernails are made of! This material sits in layers on the tail and knocks against itself to produce a rattling sound when the snake vibrates its tail. A snake can rattle back and forth up to 90 times per second.
- As the body of the snake grows, the skin does not grow with the body so the snake grows new skin that fits better. The rattlesnake sheds its skin 2 to 3 times a year. The snake begins the process of shedding its skin by rubbing its face against rough surfaces such as a rock. The snake continues to do this until the outer layer of skin is torn open. Once the skin is torn open, the snake ripples the muscles of its body to stretch the skin and begin to wiggle out of it. The skin is usually shed in one piece. Every time the snake sheds its skin a newly added segment of rattle can be seen on the snake!
- The body temperature of a rattlesnake can determine how dangerous it is. When a snake has a cooler body temperature, the rattling from their tails become slower and farther apart. The warmer the snake the faster the rattle will sound, the more venom it has, and the faster it can strike, making it more dangerous.
- Keep your distance as this rattlesnake has what is considered to be one of the most potent venoms in North America and these snakes have a reputation for being aggressive toward people and will defend themselves if they feel they are being threatened.
- Each year in the United States 7,000 to 8,000 people are bit by venomous snakes.