

We saw a rattlesnake on Los Trancos Trail. It remained stationary for the longest time. Another hiker joined us and tossed some rocks at the snake – not hitting it but landing behind it. Finally the snake moved off the trail, but very slowly. When encountering a rattlesnake what is the best course of action?

Staying still is a very normal behavior for a rattlesnake. Snakes are reptiles and as such they can not regulate their own body temperature (they are poor thermoregulators). If they are too cold, they need to find a warm spot (like in the middle of a sunny trail); if they are too warm, they need to find a cool spot (like inside a hollow log). It takes some time for their body temperature to change so they may have stay there for a bit; the amount of time varies depending on temperature of the snake, temperature of the surroundings and how much the snake's body temperature needs to change.

The snake will probably not move much until it feels it is the right temperature. If it feels threatened it will probably move; sometimes it will move off (as was your case) or it may let you know it is not happy (i.e. coiling up, raising up its' head, hissing and rattling and possibly striking).

In general the very best course of action when meeting a snake on the trail is to leave it alone; perhaps turn around, pick another route, or just step back and enjoy the presence of the snake (you are after all in its house).

According to the American Red Cross, these steps should be taken in case of snakebite:

- Wash the bite with clean water and soap.
- Immobilize the bitten area and keep it lower than the heart.
- If the bite is on the hand or arm remove any rings, watches or tight clothing.
- Get medical help immediately. (If a victim is unable to reach medical care within 30 minutes, a bandage, wrapped two to four inches above the bite, may help slow venom. The bandage should not cut off blood flow from a vein or artery. A good rule of thumb is to make the band loose enough that a finger can slip under it.)

Rattlesnake tidbits:

Each year 45,000 people are bitten by snakes in the United States.

Approximately 8,000 people a year receive venomous snakebites in the U.S., 9-15 victims die (that's about 1/10 of one percent).

About 3,000 venomous snakebites each year are "illegitimate" meaning someone was playing with/harassing/teasing a poisonous snake.

About 85% of natural snakebites are below the knee.

Males are bitten more often than females (probably due to alcohol and/or testosterone), 18 – 28 year olds are the most commonly bitten age group.

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25 – 50% of adult rattlesnake bites are dry, with no venom injected (adult snakes know they can not swallow you whole and would rather not waste the venom trying to kill something they will not be able to eat).

Rattlesnakes account for about 75% off all snake bites in the United States each year.