

The Buzz

Advocates *for* Snake Preservation



Changing how people view & treat snakes

Spring 2020 • #03

40 Rattlesnakes Discovered in Couple's Shed!

Usually headlines like that are followed by a story detailing how *miraculously* no one was hurt before the snakes were inevitably removed or killed. This is not that story. But it did start out that way.

Initially, this couple wanted the rattlesnakes gone. But since removing the snakes does not address the reason they show up in the first place, new ones showed up and the old ones found their way back. In rural Arizona, their lush yard offers food and water for wildlife (including snakes) and an old adobe structure used for storage provided the best overwintering den around for Western Diamond-Backed Rattlesnakes, what we would come to call the “*Snake House*.”

Nowadays snakes are only moved if they're hanging around immediately outside the couples' house, a hundred yards back to the Snake House. The homeowners have become snake stewards, greeting them when encountered and offering apologies to them when disturbed. In short, they treat rattlesnakes like the good neighbors they are. So what happened?

#EducationIsConservation isn't just a hashtag. Our friend and colleague John has been working directly with this couple for years, since he was first called upon to solve their snake problem. Initially he convinced them to let him

move, rather than kill, the snakes, and with each visit he'd teach them a bit more about their snake neighbors. Eventually he got permission to enter the Snake House each winter to count and identify its occupants while making improvements so that it is more snake-friendly and safer for people to access.

This story has a happy ending. What was once an unwanted infestation is now a source of pride. The owners of the Snake House permit John and us to monitor the comings and goings of snakes with cameras, and each winter during our annual count, invite friends to check out *their* snakes. During this festive event, we share stories and answer questions about rattlesnakes (and living with them) and everyone sees how timid and peaceful rattlesnakes are while learning more about them.



Western Diamond-backed Rattlesnakes snuggled together in The Snake House.

And we're learning from the snakes too. Unlike our Arizona Black Rattlesnake dens, it's a different group every year. Many repeat visitors (though they seem to rotate between this and other unknown dens), but always new faces too. And unlike other Western Diamond-Backed Rattlesnake dens we've monitored, several juveniles use the Snake House too, as well as other snake species including Mohave Rattlesnakes.

We're in this for the long haul; changing how people view and treat snakes does not happen overnight, *but it does happen.*

Old Friends

Late this summer we visited one of our study sites after a near two-year absence. It was nesting season and though we saw fewer snakes than in years past, who we did see made it even more special.

We saw one of our oldest friends, TWA, and her new family — her fourth litter we've observed. We first met a clearly pregnant TWA in the spring of 2011 at the outset of our Arizona Black Rattlesnake social behavior study. She was the biggest, oldest mom that year (and every year since). As large and black as an adult male in that population, her long, non-tapering rattle indicated she stopped growing long ago.



TWA, Arizona Black Rattlesnake, with one of her newborns, September 2019.

TWA often shares her nest with younger moms and as is usually the case, sticks them with the child care duties. In fact, in 2011, 2013, and 2015, we never observed her with her kiddos, only with a sitter. But on our last day in 2019, we finally saw TWA with one of her six newborns.

Based on what we've learned about this population, TWA was (at least) in her early teens when we met her in 2011, so **she's pushing 20 years old** now and still producing big, healthy litters. It's hard to study snakes long enough to learn how long they live because there is very little funding for that type of work. We're fortunate that your support enables us to continue learning from this remarkably tolerant group of rattlesnakes.

Be a Snake Hero!

Snakes deserve a voice and together we give them one. **Your gift brings us closer to a world where snakes are respected and appreciated instead of feared and hated.**
Together we can make it happen.

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You can also donate online at:
www.snakes.ngo/donate

Online Outreach

Melissa Amarello Gophersnakes (aka bullsnakes) are totally harmless and great to have around your yard even if you don't like snakes! They occasionally eat rattlesnakes, but mostly compete with them for food.

Regardless of the species, moving or killing is a temporary fix, not a real solution. Whatever drew that one will attract others. Check out our Snake Country Survival Guide for tips to make your place less attractive to snakes or learn to safely coexist:
www.livingwithsnakes.org

I HATE snakes! All of them. But, I read the web-link you posted. It was very informative. Thanks for sharing 😊
Like · Reply · 2d

Melissa Amarello Thanks for reading it, I appreciate your open mind. I hope the snake photos weren't too disturbing.
Like · Reply · 23h

Melissa Amarello having to view the photos was worth the great information. I actually relocated one of the watering bowls I had setting out for the stray animals after reading the article because it was too close to my huge lilac bush. 🙌
Like · Reply · 7h

When fear and misinformation was spread in her Facebook community group, our Executive Director responded with facts, empathy, and kindness.

To finish our celebration of ASP's fifth anniversary, [we shared five snake stories online](#), one each of the final five weeks of 2019. We're sharing three of those stories in this issue of *The Buzz*: 40 Rattlesnakes Discovered in Couple's Shed, Old Friends, and Keeping Wildlife Management Science-Based. These three are representative of ASP's education, research, and advocacy work.

2019 was a year of reflection and strategizing. We're working to create a sustainable model for snake preservation so that ASP has the capacity to keep fighting for snakes for as long as they need help. We're all in this together for the legless creatures we love and you've demonstrated that we can depend on you -- we raised \$10,000 during our year-end campaign!

THANK YOU so much, for your support, for all you do for snakes, every day!

Melissa Amarello

Executive Director, ASP



Melissa and Henry, a Western Diamond-Backed Rattlesnake.



Advocates for Snake Preservation

uses science, education, and advocacy to promote compassionate conservation and coexistence with snakes.

Who We Are

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Thank You!

Contributors to our record-setting, year-end campaign!

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Madrean Mountain Kingsnake

Keeping Wildlife Management Science-Based

"Snakes are threatened by the same issues that affect all wildlife (e.g., climate chaos, habitat loss, exploitation), but negative attitudes may be the biggest barrier to their conservation because they impede our ability to address other threats."

That is why we founded ASP. But that situation was something we'd only read about; we hadn't actually seen a conservation project halted for this reason, until we got a call for help about a situation in Massachusetts.

Fear and misinformation surrounding a Timber Rattlesnake conservation project inspired legislation that would require any conservation efforts to be approved by the Massachusetts legislature. We reached out to local media and together with YOU, let the legislature know that science, not politics, should drive conservation. **WE WON.** The Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife can continue to use the best available science to inform conservation and preserve wildlife.

A similar situation arose the following year in Arizona, when a change was proposed to a prohibition on shooting guns within city limits that would have allowed shooting at snakes and other small animals. There are safer and more effective ways to resolve wildlife conflicts than shooting in populated areas and this legislation would likely have resulted in more snakebites since it encouraged people to approach venomous snakes rather than leave them alone. **Together we urged the Arizona legislature to reject this irresponsible legislation, and they did!**

One of the swing voters read one of your letters because it inspired them to vote against this reckless legislation. Don't ever think that your voice doesn't matter because a single letter can make a difference and stop a bill that seemed certain to pass.