

The Buzz

Advocates *for* Snake Preservation



Changing how people view & treat snakes

Winter 2020 • #05

Finding Hope in Dark Times

2020 has been a rough year. COVID-19, unemployment, natural disasters, and cancelled travel plans have wreaked havoc on our health and psyches. Snakes haven't been spared, either. With so many people on lockdown or out of work, there were more encounters with snakes in yards and on trails, often with unhappy endings for the snakes.

I got a call from the manager of a local preserve in July asking if I could assess an injured snake. I arrived to find a rattlesnake that had been stabbed at least eight times by a preserve visitor who also cut off the end of her tail to take her rattle, then left her for dead.

In a hideous twist, the visitor stabbed her using a stake that held a sign telling visitors to stay away from rattlesnakes. I stitched her up as best I could and gave her antibiotics. She survived the night, giving me hope, but she ended up dying the next afternoon. When I conducted the necropsy, I counted 12 early term fetuses—this rattlesnake would have become a mother one or two months later.

Meanwhile, the incident had been captured on camera by other preserve visitors and was getting a lot of press on social media and the local news, with some arguing that killing a rattlesnake at a preserve was unethical and even criminal, and others wondering why anyone

cared about rattlesnakes. While the perpetrator was never found, the publicity got a lot of people talking about rattlesnakes. If there's one thing I've learned as a science communicator, it's to take advantage of publicity when it presents itself. I joined forces with the preserve to organize a World Snake Day event, where over a hundred people, mostly families with young children, came out to learn about why rattlesnakes are important members of our community. One attendee, a local 12-year-old named Wyatt, asked me how to find rattlesnakes locally, to which I replied that he should go hiking and watch for coiled, camouflaged snakes alongside the trails.



A pregnant Southern Pacific Rattlesnake “babysits” another female’s babies in The Land Conservancy’s Pismo Preserve in Pismo Beach, California, photographed by Spencer Riffle.

About a month later, Wyatt called to tell me he'd followed my advice and had found a “pile of rattlesnakes” at the preserve. He led me to the first rookery of Southern Pacific Rattlesnakes that I have ever seen, with several pregnant females and adult males “babysitting” brand new pups while their mothers hid in a crevice nearby. The rookery, however, was right next to the trail. I was worried about a hiker or a dog being bitten, or snakes being killed in a repeat of what had happened there earlier in the summer. So, I was thrilled when the preserve managers decided to close the trail to protect the snakes. I was allowed to hike up a few times a week to watch new pups

Continued inside...

Finding Hope in Dark Times *(continued)*

appear as all the females gave birth, then they all eventually shed and dispersed on the safely closed trail. Wyatt often joined me and told me that this was “by far the coolest experience of my life.”

At the risk of sounding trite by quoting Socrates, “*The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new.*” Just like the positive change that will inevitably sprout from the mire that is 2020, one rattlesnake’s tragic death helped inspire the education of hundreds of people about rattlesnakes and ensured the protection of a sensitive rookery where dozens of baby rattlesnakes were safely born.



Newborn Southern Pacific rattlesnake pups rest at a rookery where multiple females gave birth together. The pups will soon shed and disperse from the rookery in search of lizards to eat, photographed by Wyatt Stapp.

Last but not least, it cemented a local boy’s interest in becoming a herpetologist when he grows up. That’s what I call a happy ending.

- Emily Taylor, PhD, Board of Directors, ASP

Thank You!

Central Coast Snake Services raised over **\$1200** for ASP with their Rattlesnake Beauty Pageant 2021 Calendars! Thanks to the photographers for donating their art.

“ASP is exactly the voice that snakes, especially rattlesnakes need.”

- Robert via greatnonprofits.org

Welcome New Board Members!

We’re excited to welcome two new team members this fall:

Emily Taylor is a Professor of Biological Sciences at the California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, California and owner of Central Coast Snake Services, where she helps people in her community solve problems with rattlesnakes.



Jesús A. Rivas is a wildlife biologist who has studied snakes for more than 30 years, including more than a quarter of a century exploring the lives of Green Anacondas in South America. Look for his new book, *Anaconda: The Secret Life of the World’s Largest Snake*.



Advocates for Snake Preservation

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

Who We Are

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Emily Taylor, PhD, Board of Directors

Jesús A. Rivas, PhD, Board of Directors

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info@snakes.ngo • 520-333-6957

We've all made accommodations to protect our communities during this difficult year. Nearly all of our in-person outreach was cancelled, so like many, we shifted our work on the fly and transitioned to online formats. After its abrupt cancellation in March, we moved our local class on coexisting with snakes online this fall and it went very well. While in-person outreach may be the most impactful, online educational platforms allow us to reach a much broader audience. We're excited to offer more online classes in the near future, featuring experts from within and outside ASP.

As we close the book on our 6th year, it is clear that we have not escaped the financial challenges 2020 has brought and I must humbly ask for your financial support. At a time when misinformation seems to spread more easily than truth, it's ever more important to support expertise. Please consider a financial gift to ASP to keep us empowered to reach and teach people about the importance of snakes. You can also support us through our online merchandise store and as always by spreading positive messages about snakes.

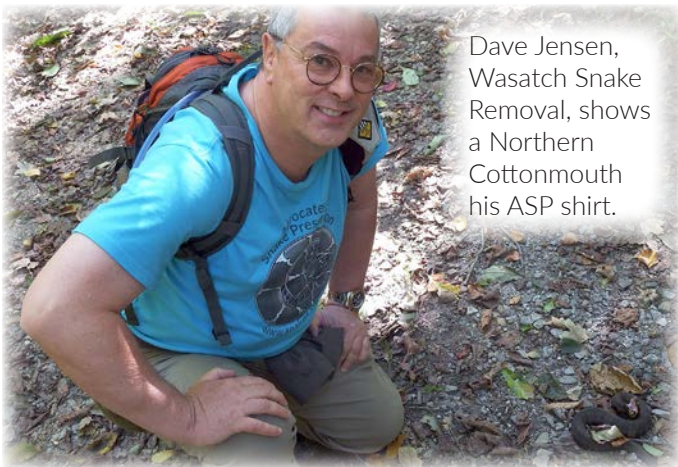
THANK YOU so much, for all you do for snakes, every day!

Melissa Annarello

Executive Director, ASP



Melissa admiring a Western Diamond-Backed Rattlesnake.



Dave Jensen, Wasatch Snake Removal, shows a Northern Cottonmouth his ASP shirt.

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Ring-Necked Snake (*Diadophis punctatus*).

Snake Peeks: Into the Den



Above: an Arizona Black Rattlesnake peeks out from behind a Striped Whipsnake (or two?), at their shared den entrance.

Left: a Tiger Rattlesnake perfectly blends in with his surroundings (camouflaged), even in his winter den. Photos by Jeff Smith.