

Some Friendly Snake Stories

I recently sat through another entertaining, informative talk on Hill Country Snakes by our resident expert Dave Barker. Dave points out that most people are a lot more afraid of snakes than is warranted, especially since, relative to humans and all other animals, they are all short, slow and silent.

And the topic brought to mind some of my own stories about snakes we have seen around our place in the past 17 years. Here are some of them.

We were sitting on the back porch one afternoon when we noticed a scrub jay outside the fence calling loudly and jumping back and forth between a pile of rocks to some low limbs. I said to Priscilla, "I bet there is a snake in those rocks." because that is just the way jays behave when they see a snake. We went out to investigate and after I removed a couple of rocks a Texas rat snake dashed out and up into the overhanging black jack and into a hole in the limb. Dave says this is where these snakes usually live.

Another time, we were out on the front porch when we heard the unmistakable squeal of a hurt rabbit in a prickly pear a few yards away. When we arrived at the prickly pear, I saw the back half of a Texas rat snake—the front half somewhere in the cactus. Since Priscilla has a soft spot in her heart for rabbits I grabbed the snake and pulled it out, not sure what I would find. It turns out it didn't have anything in its mouth and I relocated it a hundred yards or so away. Later we saw a mother rabbit moving her young.

Yet another time, we had a turkey nesting in some tall grass under a post oak tree and she had about 5 or 6 eggs in the nest. Checking on the nest the next day, we first saw only 2 or 3 eggs, but then we noticed a rat snake crawling slowly away with two or 3 bulges along its body. Eventually the turkey lost all of her eggs and abandoned the nest.

For several years, we had a coachwhip around the house occasionally. I think it was a western coachwhip, but eastern and western live here and their coloring can be similar. It was always fun to watch the fastest snake in the Hill Country crawl away if we startled it—it would crawl away some distance, then raise its head and turn around and look at us. One time when it was hot and dry, we had been watering some plants on the concrete porch when we notice a coachwhip licking up the moisture on the concrete—it obviously really wanted the water because it let me get quite close to watch.

Another time I opened the barn door and noticed on top of the air cleaner of a chipper there was a snake coiled up. I didn't pay much attention to it at first as it had a stripe the entire length of its body which means, in the Hill Country, it can't be harmful. But then I looked again and noticed that it was still there which I thought strange that my presence had not caused it to flee. And then I noticed there was not one but two snakes coiled up together, one smaller than the other, obviously mating.

I had to check the books to be sure, but these were eastern blacknecked garter snakes, pretty common.

I think it was some time the next year that Priscilla was outside and opened the back door and said, “You want to see my snake?” I grabbed by camera and went outside, assuming she had seen the coachwhip again, but she was holding a baby eastern blacknecked garter snake, may be 6 inches long. It was really cute and she played with it a while and then put it back in the flower bed where she had found it. A while later I was out in an area maybe 25 feet from where she had put the little fellow down and I thought I saw the same one and was surprised such a small snake had moved so far—that is until as I stood looking around and saw two more! Obviously, the mother had had her young (garter snakes are live bearers) in that area recently

I find snakes, like all other wildlife, fun and fascinating to watch—we just need to not destroy their habitat and leave them alone.

Until next time...

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