

## Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake (*Crotalus adamanteus*)

Graham Segger

My wife and I enjoy spending time working in our yard, which contains a number of palmetto thickets. We are continually cautioned by friends to “watch out for the rattlesnakes” while out there engaging with nature. This often spurs interesting behavior from us as we flail away at the bushes, make lots of noise and keep our chain saw primed and at the ready before proceeding in with our big boots to attack the fast growing and prolific fronds. In four years in this home we’ve yet to see or hear a rattlesnake, but that does not mean that they aren’t out there. Indisputable photographic evidence below proves that rattlesnakes do occasionally forage in our community, so caution is indeed warranted.

The Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake is the most common venomous snake in southwest Florida and is the largest and one of the most dangerous of all venomous snakes in North America. Typical length of this snake is 3 to 6 feet, though larger snakes up to 7 feet have been reported. It is a pit viper, so named for the heat-sensing pit organ located between the eye and the nostril on either side of the head. They have yellow-bordered, black diamond coloration. Rattlesnakes love the dry, pine flatwoods and saw palmetto thickets which are so common in our area, but are quite averse to human contact. They are only likely to strike a human if disturbed, and even then, only after a warning rattle. The fate of mice, rats, squirrels and birds is less secure as the snake will rest in ambush for them and can strike up to one third of the distance of its own length. Their venom is a dangerous hemotoxin which can be fatal if not treated quickly with antivenins.

The photo below, taken just off Cape Cole Blvd. in Burnt Store Marina in 2011, shows a small diamondback (barely 3 feet long) consuming a roof rat one third it’s length. Other photos taken at the time confirm that it was in fact a diamondback, and not a smaller Dusky Pigmy Rattlesnake which grows to no more than 30 inches at maturity, and might better fit the size profile. The snake first bit the rat, and then after the rat succumbed to the venom, the snake began consuming it whole and dragged it back into the thicket.



Photo by Peggy Baldwin

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Another Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake encounter off Islamorada Blvd in 2015 did not end quite so well for the five foot snake. The photo below displays the size of the rattle.



Photo by Holly Serokos

Some have speculated that you can tell the age or size of a rattlesnake by counting the number of rings on the rattle (12 in this case) but in fact this is not the case. A new ring is produced each time the snake sheds its skin which can happen several times a year. In addition, the rattles will frequently break off naturally.

Following are several stories about rattlesnakes culled from a variety of historical accounts.

Some of the earliest non-indigenous settlers in Southwest Florida were cattlemen. Often cooperative roundups were held by neighboring ranchers. The cows were marked and branded, penned, then driven to the west coast (including the docks in Punta Gorda and just off Burnt Store Road) where they were shipped to Cuba and other ports. Cattleman B.E. "Teet" Alderman (1877-1967), son of pioneer cattleman William Alderman, recalled that at one time a crew was building a set of cow pens at Indian Town Hammock (30 miles north of Lake Okeechobee) when they killed 37 rattlesnakes during a single work period. "All in the day's work" he said.

The 15,900 acre Matlacha Plantation was purchased by Ogden Phipps from the Matlacha Cattle Company in 1955 for \$475,000. He later sold it to the Cape Coral developers, the Rosen Brothers, in 1959 for \$520 per acre. The Plantation, also known as the Phipps Game Preserve, ran from Santa Barbara Boulevard to Matlacha Pass and from Pine Island Road down to the Caloosahatchee River. It was purchased primarily as a hunting preserve (and land speculation) and was managed by F.F. "Fingers"

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O'Bannon whose father, Rev. Floyd Frank O'Bannon (1904-1990), was the keeper of the bird feeders, bird dogs and kennels. Quail were introduced to the area as a game bird though mourning doves and ducks were also abundant. Mr. Phipps was said to have spent huge sums of money per year on feed (mostly millet) to attract the birds. Also attracted to the millet were rattlesnakes which were a risk to the hunters and dogs. Fingers O'Bannon claimed that "Daddy kept count of the rattlesnakes he killed. Altogether it was 3,640." The sources do not state if that was a lifetime count or during his period as a gamekeeper, but either way that amounts to a lot of snakes.

Jimmie Roberts, the Lee County Tax Collector from 1942 to 1961, reported that when he and his friends went hunting in the Cape Coral pine and palmetto flatwoods they would wear boots and canvas snake leggings that came almost to the knee and were lined inside with copper wire to repel snake bites.

"Rattlesnake roundups" were very controversial events in Florida and throughout the southern USA in the twentieth century. The practice began in Oklahoma in 1939 and ran for about 50 years. Teams of hunters would go out into the surrounding counties as part of an organized competition to see who could bring in the biggest and largest quantity of rattlesnakes. The hunters often used questionable techniques such as burning the saw palmetto bushes or pouring gasoline or ammonia into gopher tortoise burrows to flush out the snakes which would then be captured or shot. Often 500 snakes or more would be turned in over a single week. Studies have shown that the practice resulted in significant depletion of the species in the areas of the hunt. Most states have now banned the roundups and the use of gasoline which also has other negative environmental impacts.

Snowbirds can take some comfort in knowing that Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnakes spend much of the winter hibernating in gopher tortoise holes.