

Animals
Paula Nixon

Bronze Medal

THE VISITOR

She showed up on a mid-July afternoon, all four feet of her stretched out in the shade up against the house. I had been expecting her for years, but not on the patio, her tail less than ten feet away from my back door.

I kept my distance, studied the row of dark brown butterfly-shaped markings that ran along the length of her tan, scaled back. Pretty, but she looked like a rattlesnake to me. I didn't know enough at the time to look at the shape of her head. Triangular, venomous; rounded, non-venomous. And I certainly didn't get close enough to check out her pupils—elliptical or round. But I did lean forward just a bit to check out her tail and didn't see any rattles. She never moved. I assumed she was aware of my presence, but couldn't tell for sure.

Since neither one of us seemed to feel threatened, I quietly opened the screen door and was surprised by the sound of my calm voice telling my husband, Dave, about the visitor. He and I took turns—one kept an eye on her and snapped photos while the other perused herpetological websites, trying to identify her species.

Like many people I harbor a serious fear of snakes that has nothing to do with any firsthand experience. But it runs deep. A few weeks before this snake showed up on my doorstep, I visited an outdoor exhibit of plant and animal life in the Mojave Desert. Although it was a 99-degree day in Las Vegas, I felt a chill as I hurried past the snakes in their glass enclosures. I didn't pause, not even a glance. As a kid I heard tales from Dad and his survey crew, who worked out in fields and along remote roads of western Kansas, about encounters with the limbless reptiles. Once or twice I found one of the crew's trophies—rattles cut off the tails of the dead creatures—on the dashboard of

the company pickup. The half-serious joke at our dinner table was that ALL snakes were rattlesnakes.

Snakes have had a bad reputation from the beginning. Turn to the third chapter of Genesis and you'll find the too-smart-for-his-own-good serpent in the Garden of Eden chatting it up with Eve, telling her that nothing bad will happen if she eats from the tree of knowledge. Wrong. Even though Eve had been warned, the snake took the fall. God was unsparing: "Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life."

And in the dust is where I always expected to run into a snake, not reclining at my back door. For more than twenty years I have lived on a wooded acre in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains—lots of pine trees, rocks, and dirt—plenty of places for a snake to soak up the sun or snooze in the shade. Every time I walk up the gravel driveway to take out the trash or pick up the mail, I feel my toes curl in my open-toed sandals and wish I had remembered to put on sneakers.

Scientists are still trying to figure out if we are born with a fear of snakes or if it's learned. Humans and snakes have been evolving together for over forty million years, so it makes sense that we might have developed a natural wariness of this reptile since some of them can hurt or even kill us. Researchers have conducted studies with six-month-old babies, gauging the difference in their reactions to photos of flowers versus snakes by watching the pupils of their eyes. There is not universal agreement, but at the very least, it appears that humans have an elevated awareness of snakes from an early age.

This snake, relaxing on my patio, was my first encounter with one of the reptiles in the wild. I wondered what had attracted her to this specific shady spot. It was hot, 90 degrees, but not unusual for a July day in northern New Mexico. It had been a rainy month so far, twice as much as normal, but even with that extra inch of moisture the ground was dry. Maybe it was the color of the recently-stained concrete, a mottled brown, a hue similar to her own. And it was a quiet place, at least until she was discovered.

Forty-six species of snakes live in New Mexico; eight of them are venomous and seven of those are different types of rattlesnakes. The photos on the websites confused me: gopher snakes, hog-nosed snakes, rat snakes—all in varying shades of tan and brown with dark blotches. My snake didn't look exactly like any of those on NM Herpetological Society's website. I sent an email with a photo to the president of the Society and received a quick response, "Bull snake, harmless."

According to the field guide, bull snakes do look like rattlesnakes and, when threatened, puff themselves up and imitate the rattle by shaking their tails. Big snakes, they can grow up to seven feet long. Ours was a small one and at that, Dave estimated she was much shorter than my guess of four feet. More like two feet, maybe two and a half. After several minutes of our chatter and the repeated opening and closing of the screen door, the snake slithered along the wall to a spot behind a shallow pan filled with potting soil. But her tail gave her away and we followed.

Dave was the one who identified the snake as female, but didn't say why. It was a hunch; there was no way to know from where we observed her. Bull snakes have few predators—raptors and humans. Many don't survive crossing roads and highways, their large size a tradeoff for speed. Others die at the tip of a shovel, misidentified as the dangerous snakes they mimic in an effort to scare off those who would do them harm.

After she left and disappeared down the hill, I felt like I had passed a test, one of my own making. When the snake appeared I didn't panic, didn't call animal control, didn't rush to the garage for a spade.

I haven't seen her again. The seasons have changed several times and summer is once again approaching. Bull snakes can live ten years or longer in the wild, so it's likely she's still out in my untamed backyard, recently emerged from winter hibernation, hunting mice and gophers.

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