

## Madera Canyon Species Spotlight:

### Snakes

Even in late spring, Arizona temperatures often vary from day to day. Some days are quite warm, others more temperate and cool. It can be a bit of a rollercoaster ride- especially up on the mountain. And spring nights remain relatively cool, a chilly 50's at best. But as April gives way to May, cooler days become rare and overall warming announces the coming of summer heat to the canyon. Warm days and nights mean that many canyon animals, particularly reptiles, will be more active. It will be a good time to watch for snakes.

Madera Canyon, with bajada and foothills below, supports an impressive species list of snakes. Some 27 species reside in the many habitats and plant communities between the Santa Cruz Valley and peaks of the Santa Ritas, including seven venomous rattlesnake species. They vary widely in size, coloration and life habits. Local snakes range from small, worm-like Smith's Black-headed Snake that maxes out at 12" to large, muscular Sonoran Gophersnake that can top 6+ feet in length. Many species, such as the rattlesnakes, Glossy Snake and Nightsnake, sport cryptic hues of earth tones and blotches that blend with their surroundings. In contrast, other species like Knobloch's Mountain Kingsnake, Long-nosed Snake and venomous Sonoran Coralsnake are brightly colored and strikingly marked.

Sonoran Gophersnakes are versatile generalists found in every biotic community in the Santa Ritas from desert to mountain. They are usually out during the day, but become nocturnal during hot weather. Primarily a rodent predator, this non-poisonous constrictor also eats lizards, other snakes, birds and raids nests for eggs. Twin-spotted Rattlesnakes, one of three small montane rattlesnake species found in Madera Canyon, are specialists restricted mainly to rocky talus piles on the highest slopes of the canyon. Primarily out during the day, these venomous pit vipers chiefly eat lizards, but will also take small mammals and birds. The other two montane rattlesnakes in the canyon are Banded Rock Rattlesnake and Arizona Ridge-nosed Rattlesnake.

Species, like Coachwhip, Sonoran Whipsnake and Eastern Patch-nosed Snake are diurnal, active and feeding during the day. Long-nosed Snake, Sonoran Lyresnake, Nightsnake and Sonoran Coralsnake are local serpents that are primarily nocturnal. Most rattlesnakes, Common Kingsnake and other species take advantage of seasonal temperatures- diurnal during the mild temperatures of spring and fall, then becoming nocturnal as summer temperatures soar. Moderate temperatures & humidity following monsoon rainfall often stimulates activity levels.

The most commonly encountered snake in Madera Canyon is Black-tailed Rattlesnake. It pays to stay alert, as they can be on any trail from Proctor well up into the Mt. Wrightson Wilderness. Other more commonly seen canyon snakes are Knobloch's Mountain Kingsnake and Sonoran Whipsnake.

Few animals elicit such strong emotional responses from humans as snakes do. But- love 'em, hate 'em or terrified of 'em- it is extremely important for everyone to realize that snakes are integral to the environment, in need of protection and preservation! Observe, but leave them be. Do not kill or collect them! Snakes are amazing examples of evolutionary design and adaptation. Many species, like Knobloch's Mountain Kingsnake and Green Ratsnake, are becoming rare in the wild. Captive-bred snakes are available for hobbyists that want to keep them. Other than scientific research, there is no reason to capture and keep a wild snake!

In the coming warmer days, a snake crossing the road up to Madera Canyon is often your best chance to see a wild one. Coachwhips are regularly seen crossing between Continental School & Box Canyon Rd.- often out even in surprisingly hot weather. Long, graceful snakes, they can be solid or partially black, pinkish red, tan or rusty. Western Patch-nosed Snakes often cross around the Florida Canyon bridges up towards Proctor. Up to three feet, they are swift, slim snakes, tan with two brown stripes down the body. Cool afternoons and evenings after a rain and humid monsoon nights are active periods- time to really watch for wildlife on the road! Mojave and Western Diamond-backed rattlesnakes can be seen on the same stretch where Coachwhips prowl during the day.

Wildlife- especially snakes, does not fare well on roads with high-speed vehicles. Other animals are out there too, so drive reasonably, stay aware and keep a sharp look-out. It can be well worth your time and effort. Live snakes are much more interesting to observe than flat, dead ones!!

List of the snakes from the Santa Cruz Valley up into Mt. Wrightson Wilderness:

Western Threadsnake	Mexican Gartersnake (historically)
Sonoran Coralsnake	Western Diamond-backed Rattlesnake
Smith's Black-headed Snake	Mohave Rattlesnake
Yaqui Black-headed Snake	Black-tailed Rattlesnake
Ring-necked Snake	Tiger Rattlesnake
Nightsnake	Twin-spotted Rattlesnake
Sonoran Lyresnake	Banded Rock Rattlesnake
Sonoran Gophersnake	Arizona Ridge-nosed Rattlesnake
Glossy Snake	
Eastern Patch-nosed Snake	
Western Patch-nosed Snake	
Green Ratsnake	
Sonoran Whipsnake	
Coachwhip	
Long-nosed Snake	
Common Kingsnake	
Knobloch's Mountain Kingsnake	
Black-necked Gartersnake	
Checkered Gartersnake	