

Harmless Hill Country Snakes

Priscilla opened the back door and said "You want to see my snake?" Grabbing my camera as I usually do whenever she says something like that, I followed her back outside, expecting her to lead me to where she had once again found our resident 5 foot long western coachwhip. Instead, as soon as I was outside she showed me the prettiest little baby Eastern blackneck garter snake she was holding. It was at most about 9 inches long and no more than about a quarter of an inch in diameter with the brightest yellow, orange and black markings.

After I took pictures she let it go where she had found it under the blackjack tree. A short while later, she came back in and reported she had found it, or another one like it, some distance away in one of the many nursery pots she is tending on the other side of the garage. I went out to look and soon saw a second one and then a third, all within a foot or two of each other.

These were all obviously newborns (these garter snakes are live-bearers). My mind immediately went back to a little over two years earlier when I found two eastern blackneck garter snakes mating out in the RV barn, and then just a few months ago when I had again seen the male (or one like it.....males are much smaller than the females) in nearly the same place in the barn.

Seeing the three brightly-colored little guys in one place also made me think about the coachwhip and worry about their safety. Most recently the coachwhip was spotted in the blackjack being scolded by the pair of cardinals after two of their three fledglings had flown into the blackjack.

While we hadn't seen the Texas rat snake for a while, I knew these little ones wouldn't be much more than a snack for him. After all, he seemed to have no trouble with the two turkey eggs we saw him make off with in a previous year.

The above-mentioned Eastern blackneck garter snake (*Thamnophis cyrtopsis ocellatus*) is one of several garter snakes in Texas. They and the several ribbon snakes all have brightly colored stripes running the length of their body. There are no venomous snakes in Texas that have that kind of coloration.

The silvery-tan Western coachwhip (*Masticophis flagellum testaceus*) may be the fastest snake in Texas and it is active during the daytime, so it is easily seen. But if it wants to hide, it climbs into a shrub and disappears among the branches. Sometimes it will crawl some distance away, then raise its head up to get a better look at you.

The Texas rat snake, also called a "chicken snake" (*Elaphe obsoleta lindheimerii*) may be one of the most common snakes in our area. They are large (usually 5-6 feet) heavy-

bodied animals with dark brown blotches on a lighter background. They are equally at home in trees or on the ground.

Of the other common snakes in our area, my absolute favorite, mainly for its color, is the Rough green snake. It is a uniform medium-green color, usually about 2 feet long and about as big around as your finger. Its color blends in well with green leaves so it is camouflaged while in shrubs, which is where I have found most of the ones I have seen.

In terms of water snakes, the only common water snakes in the Hill Country are the Blotched water snake and the Diamondback water snake. Both have relatively dark bodies and are usually between 2 and 3 feet long. While they spend most of their time near water bodies, in dry times they may be seen far removed from water.

The Eastern hognose snake is certainly the greatest actor among the snakes. If threatened, the first thing it will do is to inflate its neck and upper body to appear much larger and somewhat more rattlesnake-shaped, and to also vibrate its tail, which if done in dry leaves, sounds a lot like a rattlesnake. It may also hiss and make fake strikes. If all else fails, it may play dead by rolling over on its back and letting its tongue hang out. If you turn it over, it may flop back upside down again.

Please note that all of the snakes mentioned here are harmless and non-venomous.

Until next time...

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