

Rattlesnake Rustlers: Finding Snakes Where They Hide

Text by Catherine Clarke Fox



Rattlesnake Rustler, Heather Ramirez, with a snake she caught
Photograph by Ralph Bower/Grenada Productions

Typical Trip to the Dentist?

When Heather Ramirez of Auburn, California, went to the dentist recently with her husband Len, she wasn't there to have her teeth cleaned. She and her husband are professional snake removers. They were there to catch and return to the wild a rattlesnake that had slithered indoors.

She describes her work as “protecting people from rattlesnakes—and protecting rattlesnakes from people.” In her part of the country, the northern Pacific rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridis oreganos*¹) often comes face-to-face with humans.

Studies show these snakes generally only bite people who are trying to catch or kill them. Keeping your distance prevents bites, which are serious but not usually fatal with today's medicines. A rattlesnake can even give a loud warning that says, “I am here, stay away” with the rattles located at the tip of its tail.

“We find rattlesnakes everywhere,” says Ramirez. “In houses, in yards and woodpiles, under decks.” She says that the snakes aren't invading human homes—it's the other way around: “These animals were here first, and we humans came in and built houses. We are living in their territory.”

All in a Day's Work

Many people are frightened when they see a rattler and call for help right away. When the Ramirez phone rings, the couple drops whatever they are doing and rushes to work, often leaving a meal half-eaten on the table.

¹ Scientific Name for Rattlesnakes

The team is good at finding snakes that have gone into hiding. A tool that looks like long spaghetti tongs allow them to handle the snakes without harming them (see photo), and the tongs are long enough that the snake cannot reach them to bite.

“Never pick up a rattlesnake,” says Ramirez. “I’ve been doing this job for twelve years, and I have *never* touched one with my hands. There’s no reason to take that risk.”

“We put the snakes in wooden crates in our pickup truck. Those crates are bolted to the floor and locked for safety,” explains Ramirez. She takes the captives to holding pens at her house until she can let them go far away from human activity.

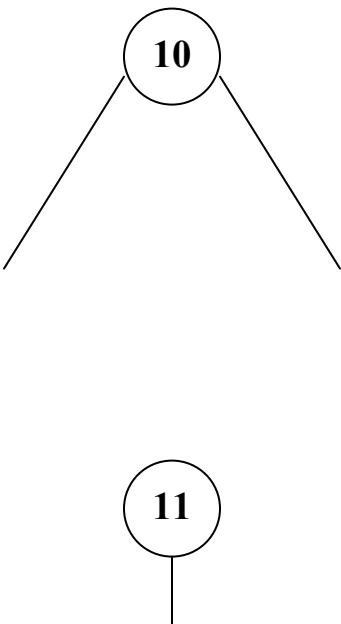
7 Ramirez tells people to read all they can about snakes so they understand these amazing animals. For example, snakes actually help humans. Small mammals like rats, mice, and gophers carry fleas and ticks that spread serious illnesses like **bubonic plague** and **Lyme disease** to people. A snake might eat a dozen rodents a year, helping control the population—and the spread of disease.

Ramirez and her husband relocate more than a thousand snakes a year. “The longest was 5 feet 9 inches (1.8 meters), and I’m only five-foot-three, so that was amazing to see.” She enjoys every day working with snakes. “I just love my job!”

8 **Snake Safety Tips**

- If you see a snake, don’t touch it. Go tell an adult.
- Snakes like warmth, and they often curl up at night next to big plastic toys outside that hold the warmth of the sun. Look carefully when you go out to play.
- Never put your hands into woodpiles or dark corners of the garage in case a snake is hiding there.
- When you’re out playing, step on rocks and logs, not over them. You don’t want to surprise a snake that might be hiding underneath.

World’s Largest Snake	
Name:	Python
Length:	49 ft
Weight:	893 lbs
Home Land:	Jakarta, Indonesia



World’s Smallest Snake	
Name:	Lesser Antillean Threadsnake
Length:	1.5 Inches
Diameter:	1/8 Inch (About the size of a pencil lead.)
Home Land:	Lesser Antilles

Words to Know

Bubonic Plague: a deadly infectious disease that has killed millions.
Lyme Disease: an infectious disease caused by bacteria.