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HOT

Rodents and rattlers

Rodents rise, rattlesnakes next?

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Rattlesnakes can be found along trails near sources of water like New Hogan and New Melones reservoirs and all streams that feed into the two.

Courtesy photo from Brian Todd

When spraying knapweeds in the yard of his Milton home, Mike Robie has to tread carefully as to not squish one of the countless tiny rodents scurrying underfoot.

"I walk around our property spraying star thistles and there are voles running all over my feet and underfoot," Robie said. "It's amazing. They're everywhere."

After a heavy winter where grass stretched higher than it has in years due to the rain, the rodents are here.

Now soon may come the predators. Though sightings have been few this summer, some expect a possible surge in the near future.

Robie believes snakes may not be out and about as much because they're able to find food easily. But that could change.

He speculated the venomous snakes peek out of their shelters and find prey almost immediately on the voles that have reproduced significantly this year. Because of that, they do not need to travel far and have fewer encounters with humans.

"I figure when a snake goes out, it's out hunting. They don't go cruising around for the fun of it," said Robie, a board member with the Calaveras County Resource Conservation District. "I was wondering if the snakes come out of the den, grab the vole, get fatter then go back to their den."

The idea may not be so far fetched, said Brian Todd, an associate professor who specializes in reptiles and amphibians at the University of California Davis. He has received calls about fewer rattlesnake sightings this year in the Central Valley and Sierra Nevada Foothill regions.

"There are so many rodents around for snakes to be able to eat. And they eat and hold still for four days of a week to digest food," said Todd, who suggested numbers could also be limited due to recent drought conditions. "The other thought is, they're still there, but they won't move a lot. They're constantly fed and don't have to move."

Many rattlesnakes throughout the region like warmer weather, but want to live near water sources, Todd said. They are cold blooded, so they cannot make their own heat. Snakes spend their lives moving back and forth between sunny and cool locations.

"They look for open spots, going between rocks and the ground," Todd said.

The lack of snake sightings may not last much longer. Waiting for what could be a "snakepocalypse," Robie feared fewer rattlesnake sightings could result in a breakout soon because there may be more reproducing without any measures taken to limit the population.

If the population of the prey increases as it has, the amount of predators in the area will also jump, said Jim Tassano, owner of Foothill Sierra Pest Control. But, there will be a time lag between the two.

"Rattlesnakes are major predators of the voles. But they're not as prolific in breeding as much as them," Tassano said. "If we have another good year for voles, we might see a lot more snakes."

If pregnant, rattlesnakes usually give birth once a year between September and June, Todd said. They can have anywhere between 10-20 babies that are small enough to coil up on a half-dollar or hockey puck.

The baby rattlesnakes typically remain with the mother until they shed their skin the first time, Todd said. From there, they all go their separate ways.

It typically takes three or four years for a rattlesnake to reach full maturity.



Areas like Copperopolis and Valley Springs have seen an outbreak of voles after a very wet winter.

Photo courtesy of U.C. Berkeley

Rattlesnake facts

- Range in size from three to five feet long. Some can reach up to seven feet long
- Live between 5 and 10 years.
- Found in Arizona, California, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas
- Eats mice, rats, rabbits, gophers, birds, lizards
- Can be found in shrubs or rocks. May also use underground holes. In the winter, they find cave and hibernate.