

Playing with rattlesnakes

The first time I remember being taught how to catch and play with live rattlesnakes I was 5 or 6 years old. It was summer and the first of my three sisters had just been born that winter. I also had a younger brother who was 2 years old which was quite a bit of fun for me as I was beginning to be able to play with him.

The summer started with what was possibly the first of many extended 'camping' trips during my life. We headed up to the mountains in Northern California. Some hippy friends of my parents had a house up in the mountains that they had been slowly building for quite some time. House may be a bit of an overstatement now, but at the time it did seem like a home to me. It did not have power and probably never would with how far out it was and certainly didn't have indoor plumbing. Of course we didn't stay in the house as it was occupied by the aforementioned friends. We did however find a nice place a few miles away after hiking into a stream.

At this age a kid couldn't have a more exciting excursion. Once we had located our 'camping' spot my dad climbed the trees and lashed large limbs between them. He then made ladders by tying together wood that we collected. It was absolutely fabulous as we were living in tree forts. I could care less the reason at the time but I do remember my dad saying that he had seen some rattlesnakes when he scoped out the area. Whatever, we had tree forts! Even mom, dad and the baby!

Once camp was setup I spent days showing my little brother how to catch alligator lizards. He wasn't so good at catching them so I did most of that. The trick was to catch them up high as if you were to slow and caught them by the tail they would decide to run off without the tail. The best time I found was later in the afternoon when they came out to bask on the racks or on top of the logs sitting in the field by camp.

Once a week we would walk through the field and find our way to the gravel road and then follow that to the house that my parent's friends lived. In the yard was a large steel tub raised off the ground. The tub was filled with a garden hose running from the spring above the house. I remember it seeming like it took all day for the tub to fill and then the fire started beneath the tub would have to burn for hours before the water was brought to a comfortable temperature. But it did make a fun bath in a giant tub with burning coals beneath up in the mountains.

I remember that the soap root that my mom's friend picked didn't really seem to do much in the way of washing but we were told to use it anyway.

Back at camp my step father kept coming home the rattlesnakes. He said there must be a den close by with the amount he was seeing, and he seemed to be more excited than worried. We cooked some up and I remember it tasting wonderful, perhaps because I was told it was an incredibly expensive exotic meal in some restaurants. My step father started keeping a collection of the rattlesnake skins and rattles on a board that he kept tied up in one of the trees to dry.

After a little while he started to teach me all about how to be safe from rattle snakes and how to deal with them if I came upon them. We talked about how much farther they could strike than what they looked like when they were in the coiled position. We practiced making rattlesnake catching sticks with a V at the end to pin their neck to the ground. I learned about not ever eating rattlesnakes that had been out of sight in a bush when they were cornered as they could have bitten themselves to get the venom into you if you ate them.

I also learned how to hold rattlesnakes as after you pinned them with your stick you could pick them up behind the neck and they were helpless. He would bring live rattlesnakes back to camp that I would practice holding. I thought they felt so weird when they wrapped around my arm while I held them. We would then kill and skin them being careful to cut behind the venom sacks and not contaminate the meat.

I was loved all the detail and steps and precautions that had to be taken. I did like the tingly excited feeling I got from holding something in my hands that could quickly kill me, but also the confidence I had in my safety if I did everything I was supposed to. All I had to do was keep a clear head and follow the steps I had learned in dealing with the rattlesnakes.

During the evenings we created a fun game of catching the dragonflies that flew around the stream by camp. Then we would tie playing cards to them and place bets on which one would fly the farthest. This was a fun game for a good part of the summer.

Sometimes later in the evening my step father would take a trip up the road to visit another person who had been camping out there in the mountains for several years. Occasionally I would be allowed to tag along and would sit by the fire listening to the stories they told while they drank beer.

Then suddenly one day my step father quite making those evening trips up the road. A couple days later we were told that we had to go into town that day. My mom did some shopping and we hung around the parking lot by the store for some time. My brother and I had fun picking cherries from a tree and eating those for hours. That evening when we returned to camp we were told that the person my step father visited was no longer there and the police had come to get him. I kept asking why over the next couple days and was finally told that he was a bad person. That he had been hiding in the woods for many years to avoid going to jail for tying someone to a tree that owed him money and beating him to death with a tire iron.

I never did ask how the police had found him, why we had just happened to be in town all day that day, and how my parents seemed to know the details of why they had come for him. I just knew without asking that this info must have slipped from him in one of those drunken conversations around the fire. And just like the other snakes in the fields there was nothing to fear, there was just a number of specific steps you had to take to deal with them.