

Lookout! Snakes are out

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3/11/2011 - **GOODFELLOW AIR FORCE BASE, Texas** -- If you don't think a rattlesnake bite is serious or even deadly, think again.

A friend's wife told me that her husband had been bitten by a rattlesnake. My friend is a hunting dog trainer and during a field trial, a fellow trainer told him that there was a snake in the area. The other trainer had marked the snake's location by placing a hat in the road and told my friend the snake was in a grassy area about 100 feet away from the hat. My friend proceeded to the area with his pistol drawn in case he encountered the snake. My friend didn't see the snake, but the snake saw him, sensed danger and struck him just above his ankle. The snake had moved and was only 10 feet away from the hat.

He was taken to a local clinic, but the bite was too serious and he had to be airlifted to a major medical center for treatment. He arrived unconscious and was kept in the trauma center emergency room for a week. The operation suite was kept on stand-by for two days in the event his foot had to be amputated.

When the doctors examined the bite area they initially thought he was bitten twice. Turns out it was only one bite, but the snake had two rows of fangs. Did I mention the snake was five feet long and had 12 rattles? A very large and mature rattlesnake which meant twice the amount of venom was injected in just one bite. They treated him with anti-venom serum upon his arrival and again three days later because of the large amount of venom.

The venom had traveled from his ankle into his foot and up his leg to just below his upper thigh. It attacked the nerves and muscle tissue so he couldn't feel anything in his foot or the lower part of his leg. Three days later he woke up with pain in his leg that he said felt like spiders inside trying to chew their way out - OUCH! Thankfully, his doctor told him that was a sign of the nerves in his leg waking up.

I visited him last weekend and if you've never seen a snake bite, I can assure it isn't pretty. The skin on his foot and ankle was yellow and so swollen it looked like it would split open at anytime. His leg and upper thigh were red and purple like someone had assaulted him with a blunt object. The wound drained constantly as his body and the anti-venom worked together to shed the poison.

After a bit of discussion about his pain, the size of the snake and some small talk, I asked him why he didn't wear snake chaps; after all, he and his competitors were working in an area that was an ideal rattlesnake habitat. His answer was some unintelligible remark about chaps being "unmanly;" at least that's what I think he said. He did add that he now had some on order.

It looks like everything will work out in the end. He was discharged from the hospital this past week. Thankfully he is strong and healthy and should recover, but he's in for a long rehab period and may not walk "normally" on that foot again.

By the way, this incident didn't take place way out in the country. It happened near a residential area in San Antonio. My friend was extremely lucky to have been close to a major trauma center; the results could have been quite different otherwise.

As we enter spring and summer, remember that snakes and other dangerous critters will be emerging from their nests and dens. Like us, they love the sunshine and you can be sure of their presence in and on rock piles and old logs or slithering through the tall grass, weeds and brush. So when you're venturing out, do so cautiously, and wear protective footwear and clothing. Keep an eye out and be careful.