“Critter Corner”

or “A Rattlesnake Meets Carma”

By: Rachael Komulainen, Hart Park Animal Keeper

This past spring/summer season, we had an unprecedented number of rattlesnakes come into populated areas of the park. Most likely, this was due to all the rain in the winter/spring, which led to a larger amount of prey animals because of all the water and resulting vegetation. We respect our wild animal residents here at Hart Park – our park is a natural setting in the non-structure areas and the perfect home to a large variety of different types of animal habitats. Therefore, I – or my snake handling trained staff – relocate these snakes into unpopulated areas of the park, when we find them. It is important to have a basic understanding of snake behavior and the proper tools and training to relocate rattlesnakes. I do NOT recommend anyone to move nor capture any venomous snake without training or the proper tools. The number one reason people get bitten is because they get too close to the snake, either accidently or on purpose.

Here are tips for staying safe in areas with rattlesnakes:

1. Stay on Trails! When you venture off marked trails, this leads to destruction of the natural habitat and increases your chances of being bitten.
2. Give plenty of space to rattlesnakes! The rule of thumb is they can strike half their body’s length. This means a 4-foot snake can strike out 2-feet. If the snake is curled up, though, you have no idea the length of the snake. Therefore, always maintain a distance of at least 10-feet from any rattlesnake to be safe.
3. IF you absolutely must get past a snake on a trail and are unable to give it a wide berth, stomp your feet and clap your hands. Snakes feel vibrations, so doing these activities will usually alert the snake to danger and it will want to escape the area.
4. In the event a rattlesnake does bite you because you either didn’t see it or got too close, don’t panic. DO NOT cut the wound and try to ‘suck out’ venom and DO NOT use a tourniquet. Just get to the nearest emergency room as soon as possible. Many people and animals get bitten every year – and survive. It all depends on underlying medical conditions, location of the bite, the amount of venom envenomated (sometimes it is a ‘dry bite’ and there isn’t even an envenomation), distance from emergency help, etc.

William S. Hart Park is exactly that: a PARK. It is filled with all kinds of wonderful, wild critters. This is their HOME and we need to remember that and find a way to live in harmony with them. Rattlesnakes are a necessary part of the ecosystem. They help to control the rodent population, which has really boomed this year because of the rain and vegetation. Where there are rodents, snakes will follow.

In July, an adult rattlesnake found its way into our alpaca pen. Alpacas are curious animals by nature and, apparently, “Carma” went over to sniff this strange creature in her pen. Boom! She got bit! Fortunately, staff were in the pen moments later to get the alpacas out for a walk and noticed the rattlesnake. Immediately, the snake was removed from the pen. “Carma” had gotten bitten on her right upper lip area. She had two bloodied holes from the puncture, and her face began to swell. Our veterinarian, Dr. Roueche, was immediately contacted. According to our vet, alpacas (fortunately!) are more tolerant of rattlesnake bites than most other animals. Therefore, his main concern was to monitor her swelling to ensure that her nostrils remained open for breathing. He prescribed medicine to reduce swelling and pain, which we administered twice per day. By the third day, her swelling had greatly decreased, and her face had returned to near normal by the end of the week. It was a scary experience for Carma and for all Hart Park Staff, as we absolutely love (and are very protective of) our critters! Thankfully, Carma has long since recovered and is, hopefully, a little wiser for the experience!