

Annabella: Friend? Foe?

By: Sherry E Engler

Ahhh! The welcome aroma of blooming iris and lilacs, the deep yellows and reds of tulips gracing the spring landscape, the bountiful pink and white blooms heavily loading the branches of the fruit trees. Ahhh! The reason spring is one of the most precious times in Rim Country! Beauty beyond compare and quite welcome after the harsh winter temperatures. Although these plants are not native, their presence reminds Rim Country residents of the abundance of rainfall and moisture we have fortunately received throughout the last few months. Spring showers! Many, many flowers!!! Wow!

With the good, usually comes a little bad. You may be thinking, "What's bad about rain and beautiful spring flowers?" Yes, the rain brings spring flowers---along with more grassy weeds which promote the rodent population which may boost the snake population. "SNAKES!!! No, no, no, NO SNAKES!!!," you declare, pausing to review the fact that snakes scare you.

In the words of my neighbor, "The only good snake is a DEAD snake!" However, I find myself disagreeing with this declaration. You see, I have recently acquired another bullsnake. (I say another bullsnake because the last one I acquired, Tutay, left home. Really? Really! A runaway snake!) Therefore, I hope this one will find happiness in our barn which seems to be attracting rodents of the unwanted kind due to the grain we feed our horses. Mind you, I don't really know if the huge snake is a she or a he. (How does one tell if one isn't a snakeologist?) So, I have given it the name of Annabella. Due to the "her" size, I felt the name Annabella would be less intimidating should the neighbors catch a glimpse of her to which I shall exclaim, "Oh, that's just Annabella, our little bullsnake."

However, she is BIG! She is the biggest bullsnake (*Pituophis catenifer sayi*) in the wild I have ever, ever seen. She is at least six feet long, actually longer, I suspect and I don't think she weighs less than nine or ten pounds. An interesting fact here, the bullsnake is considered a subspecies of the gopher snake and is one of the largest snake species in the United States. On average, the bullsnake weighs two to three pounds and averages in length approximately four to six feet. It is my belief that Annabella ranges in the higher statistics which may grow up to eight and one half feet and weigh between seven and ten pounds (9.9 pounds to be exact).

My Annabella is a pretty snake, boasting a yellowish-brown color with combination blotching of reddish brown, white, yellow, and black. She is a beauty, my Annabella. While it is my intention to safely rid the mice in the barn without using chemicals and, although I am comfortable having Annabella as a barn resident, I realize this approach to rodent riddance may not be for everyone.

For example, the bullsnake is so very similar in appearance to the western diamondback rattler, a person must be very, very cautious until the snake is accurately identified. Another interesting fact about the bullsnake is it uses this similarity as a defense against predators; yet, it is also this similarity to the rattlesnake that causes its demise when humans are frightened in a moment of surprise and cannot decipher the difference. Because of the flattening of its head, the stance of the S strike when agitated, hissing and what sounds like

rattles, the bullsnake may appear very intimidating to its predators which are birds of prey like hawks and owls.

How does the bullsnake rattle without rattles? Interestingly, when the bullsnake exhales from the right lung and forcibly exhales through the glottis or what is considered an extension of the windpipe, a small cartilage covering known as the epiglottis flaps back and forth, making a rattling sound similar to the sound of the rattles on the tail of a rattlesnake. The rattlesnake will hold its tail in the air to rattle its tail more effectively; while the bullsnake holds its tail on the ground trying to vibrate it against brush to make a more convincing impression of the venomous rattlesnake.

The nonvenomous bullsnake breeds in early spring; the female laying an average of a dozen eggs in a protected burrow nest. The eggs hatch later in the fall usually in August or September. The bullsnake will prey on a variety of rodents, small rabbits, gophers, small squirrels, ground dwelling birds and eggs, and have even been noted to devour frogs and lizards. The bullsnake is considered a constrictor which grabs the prey in its mouth and slowly constricts the whole body of the prey, which dies due to lack of oxygen. A bullsnake may devour five birds in less than fifteen minutes. This beautiful snake is often referred to as being easily agitated or extremely aggressive with a "bad attitude." Therefore, it is very important that a person does not approach the bullsnake until it has been established that the snake is in fact a bullsnake and NOT a rattlesnake; and do NOT attempt to touch the bullsnake without the help of a professional.

I know many of you will wonder why I have not added a photo of my beautiful Annabella. The truth be told, I have been up to the barn so many times looking for her that my legs are tired of traipsing up the hill to try to find her. Dog gone it!!! I hope she hasn't ran away like Tutay!!!

Best wishes to you and yours.