

Horace

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At some point over the course of our lives, some of us have special memories of friendships we forged with wild animals. It might have been a squirrel you encouraged to take food from your hand. Or blue jays you interacted with over a bag of peanuts. Perhaps a deer that became accustomed to and welcomed your presence. I've even heard tales of folks buddying up to bears and coyotes. My wild friend was a bit unusual, and I will say I made no effort whatsoever to forge this friendship. In this instance it was all Horace's idea. Horace was a Western Diamondback Rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*).

I live in an area perhaps best cast as suburban with just a twist of rural. Unlike most suburban areas in central Arizona, which generally replace Sonoran Desert with subdivision, concrete, and palm trees, Fountain Hills replaces as little as possible, with a mandate to provide a place that supplies water, utilities, and garbage pickup to human residents living *within* the Sonoran Desert. The natural desert permeates our little town, and is most welcome to do so. This arrangement translates to an area rife with rocks and cactus, brittlebush and creosote, javelina, coyotes, wood rats, and bobcats – and yes, plenty of rattlesnakes.

I am, among other things a gardener, and have a lot of plants in my yard; hundreds of agaves, cactus, and other desert-adapted flora, which I grow and nurture to the best of my ability, and this includes a need to irrigate through our more inhospitable times of year. So, a source of moisture for local fauna, many of whom have

chosen to take up residence in my extended garden. For the most part, these residents include wood rats, pocket mice, and kangaroo rats, even gophers, who all burrow incessantly, turning parts of my yard into small moon craters. So long as they don't kill or maim my plants, I go to no great effort to eliminate them, which would be impossible even if I tried.

Enter Horace, one of a fair number of diamondback rattlesnakes that visit my yard with some regularity in search of an easy meal, that meal being one or more of the scads of residents living in the booming metropolis of Rodentown. Before long I began to notice one particular snake, above and beyond the rest of the crowd. Horace had a distinctive upward tilt to his rattle, and more notably gained my attention by virtue of his demeanor, in that he never seemed rattled (see what I did there?). In fact, Horace didn't rattle at all. Over time, my new found ally in the ongoing rodent war started coming around quite a lot, despite the fact that my two large dogs and I were very active.

It wasn't long before Horace decided that passing through my yard was not enough, and chose to call it home. Through the heat of summer, Horace slept during the day in areas full of my potted plants, finding a measure of safety hiding between rows of plastic pots. The only problem with this sleeping arrangement was my occasional predilection to disturb his sleep by watering those plants. Horace did not especially enjoy those startling interruptions, but then who would? I can't imagine the unpleasant sensation

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Photo 1. Poor Horace, climbing out of the wet after being doused by my watering activities. Photo by author.

a warm exotherm experiences when hit with a rush of cold water.

Once the heat of day had passed, Horace would come out to play. He was nearly always around after dark, just going about his business and occasionally fattening up on a furry little snack or two. As I began noticing Horace around much of the time, so did Horace notice me, along with my two large dogs. And that was where things got interesting.

Most diamondback rattlesnakes are high fear animals, as evidenced by furious rattling each time a human threat is perceived. As often as not, perhaps they simply fear being trampled. Rattlers do not rattle because they're grumpy, defending territory, or demonstrating aggression. They rattle because they're fearful, and the more attention you direct their way, the more fearful they're likely to become. Unfortunately, rattlers are slow movers across most any terrain, so ill-equipped to flee from perceived threats. If unable to hide, all they can manage is hunkering down and preparing to defend themselves if it comes down to it. And of course, they can make a lot of noise to effectively declare their presence, lest they were somehow overlooked.

Horace was not a "normal" diamondback rattler. Horace was a low fear snake. He was certainly capable of rattling, but rarely did so because he wasn't afraid. He never gave me cause for concern, except of course, by virtue of his presence, which I became more and more accustomed to as time went on.

Then there were my dogs, a 30 kg Saluki and a 40 kg Afghan Hound, both male, young, and full of

vinegar. The Saluki wouldn't go near a snake if his life depended upon it. Some dogs seem to have an innate fear of snakes, and my Saluki was among them. If Horace was around and active, the Saluki was on the porch. My Afghan Hound on the other hand, had no such fear. On two separate occasions, I looked out my kitchen window to see Horace and my Afghan nose to nose in the yard, just calmly and quietly checking each other out. This of course, was a problem. It was great that Horace and my dog were getting along, but Horace was desensitizing him to other rattlesnakes, never a good idea, but that is a story for another day.

So, now Horace had set up shop in my backyard, largely due to an endless stream of easy meals in the form of small rodents. He had made peace with me and to the extent he was able, my dogs. It was rattlesnake heaven in a scary world dominated by large humans who generally treat the likes of Horace with extreme contempt.

As odd it this sounds, Horace actually began seeking out interaction with me. Whether he enjoyed my company or hoped my activity might rustle up a meal or two I couldn't say. Through the oppressive heat of summer, I often water plants by hand long after dark, filling watering cans at the spigot and dispersing contents through my yard. On many occasions, Horace was either waiting by the spigot before I arrived or moved to it after I came out. And there he would remain until I was done. It really was a bit startling to see my barely clad feet only inches from a rattlesnake head when this first began, then realizing he was there all along and I had only just noticed him.

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Photo 2. Hanging out at the watering station. Photo by author.

Later in the year, as temperatures receded, Horace and I were both more active during daylight hours, and he would on occasion, follow me around as I went about the business of tending my garden. More than once he inadvertently cornered me, leaving me no option but to turn around and saunter right past him, sometimes within inches. When he saw me coming, he would coil and lift his head, not dissimilar to a striking pose, but I knew he was just giving me a path and didn't feel threatened.

I vividly recall accidentally stepping on Horace once, to my utter chagrin. I was hurrying about, and just didn't see him. I felt a powerful squirm under my foot, which I immediately lifted, and Horace went on his way unharmed. On another occasion, Horace had settled into an area of my garden I needed immediate access to, in order to work. So, I grabbed a shovel, carefully picked him up and moved him to another part of the yard. Horace was completely alert while this played out, looking around in hilarious fashion and not expressing any particular concern, neither rattling nor attempting to slide off the shovel. He just allowed me to move him, without protest.

It always struck me that perhaps my interactions with Horace shouldn't have been so unusual. Humans are greatly feared in the animal world, and with good reason. There are far too many folks in the Desert Southwest who behave badly around snakes, killing them without cause, driven by their own ignorance and fear. Perhaps Horace simply gave me the benefit of the doubt, treating me no differently than he might any other large animal. After all, there is no reason rattlesnakes wouldn't gain some level of familiarity

with local fauna out in the real world. Everything needn't be threat or prey.

I'll admit it took a while to become comfortable around him, and there was always a small trepidation I would never overcome. He was a rattlesnake, after all! Horace was around for two years. Not all the time, he moved about the general area beyond my yard at times, which always concerned me. This low-fear snake was not likely to flourish beyond the confines of my yard, with a slew of snake-fearing neighbors about. And rattlesnakes hibernate through winter months. But I was happy when he returned to his old stomping ground the following spring, so I got to enjoy his antics for a second year. But after that second summer and autumn, I never saw Horace again. There are any number of possible reasons for that, some entirely innocuous, others not so much.

There are plenty of other anecdotes I could relay about Horace, but not a lot I can authoritatively conclude. In the end, I don't know why Horace followed me around the yard or waited for me by the spigot. It's fun to anthropomorphize and imagine a friendship bond between us, but deep down I know we weren't friends in any meaningful sense. But more importantly, I know we weren't enemies, that we were happy to coexist, and tolerated each other's presence exceedingly well. And that was truly remarkable!

My encounters with Horace occurred a few short years ago. In the interim, there have been a couple other silent rattlers around now and then, but none like Horace. To this day, I actually miss him and wish he were still around.

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