



## Snakes of the Prairie

### Wildlife and Landscapes

Scotts Bluff National Monument is a unique historic landmark which preserves both cultural and natural resources. Sweeping from the river valley woodlands, to the mixed-grass prairie, to pine studded bluffs, Scotts Bluff contains a wide variety of wildlife and landscapes. The 3,000 acres comprising Scotts Bluff conserves one of the last areas of the Great Plains which has not been significantly changed by human occupation.

### Biological Diversity of the Prairie

Four different species of snakes are known to live at Scotts Bluff National Monument, and may be seen by park visitors during the warm months of the year. Though many people regard these reptiles with feelings of fear and loathing, snakes are generally undeserving of their bad reputation. All snakes are exclusively carnivorous and often feed on rodents and insects and should be considered beneficial to humans. They are cold-blooded animals and must avoid extremes of heat and cold. For this reason, you are unlikely to see snakes in the open on hot summer days. If a snake of any kind is encountered, the best advice is to give it plenty of room and a chance to escape. All snakes avoid humans whenever possible and should not be provoked.

### Prairie Rattlesnake



Photo by Steve Thompson

Prairie Rattlesnake  
(*Crotalus viridis viridis*)

The prairie rattlesnake is the only venomous snake found at Scotts Bluff National Monument. Rattlesnakes belong to the Pit Viper family of snakes, characterized by temperature sensitive “pits” on either side of the face between the eye and the nostril. These pits are heat sensitive and aid the snake in locating its warm-blooded prey. Prairie rattlesnakes are also distinguished by a broad, triangular head, vertical eye pupils and rattles. The snakes gain a new segment of rattles each time their skin is shed. The number of rattles is therefore not a reliable indication of the snake’s age. Coloration is variable, as prairie rattlesnakes have a very wide range. Here at Scotts Bluff, they are extremely well camouflaged. Their tan or buff coloration, sometimes with a greenish cast and blotched with brown patches, hides them well in the prairie grass and rocky slopes. Prairie rattlesnakes are generally not aggressive but may bite if provoked. Furthermore, it is possible for a dead rattlesnake to bite through a reflex action; so all rattlesnakes, alive or dead, should be treated with caution and respect. The snake’s venom is a hemotoxin (blood poison). This snake can regulate the amount of venom it injects conserving what it does not need for later use. Nearly one-third of all North American venomous snake bites received by humans are “dry” or venom free.

### First Aid for Snake Bites

The victim of a prairie rattlesnake bite should stay calm. Exertion is to be avoided. If the victim is alone when bitten, he or she should walk, not run, to the Visitor Center/Museum. If not alone, the victim should be kept calm, lying flat, face up, with the bitten part immobilized below the level of the heart. Do not give anything by mouth. A park employee should be notified. Any bite from a rattlesnake should be regarded as life-threatening requiring immediate treatment from trained professionals.

## Bull Snake



**Bull Snake**  
(*Pituophis melanoleucus sayi*)

Similar in appearance to prairie rattlesnakes, bull snakes are yellowish or cream-colored with brown or reddish brown blotches. They are non-venomous but may imitate rattlesnake behavior and bite if disturbed. Noted for their consumption of rodents, such as mice, rats and large insects as well as ground nesting birds, bull snakes kill their prey by constriction. Bull snakes are often mistaken for rattlesnakes. A bull snake will commonly vibrate its tail rapidly amongst the brush or leaves as a defensive measure meant to scare away threats, not sound an attack.

## Green Racer



**Green Racer**  
(*Coluber constrictor*)

These snakes are long, slender and uniformly greenish in color, with paler, whitish coloring beneath. Racers are non-venomous but aggressive, and may bite and thrash wildly if picked up. Young racers resemble bull snakes in coloration. Active during the day, green racers feed on a variety of arthropods including crickets, grasshoppers, caterpillars, beetles and spiders. Green racers rarely bite when handled and when they do, rarely break the skin.

## Garter Snakes



**Plains Garter Snake**  
(*Thamnophis radix naydeni*)



**Common Garter Snake**  
(*Thamnophis sirtalis*)

Two kinds of garter snakes may be found at Scotts Bluff National Monument, the common garter snake and the plains garter snake. They are similar in appearance, with stripes running the length of the body. The plains garter snake has a distinct yellow or orange back stripe and cream or yellow side stripes. Coloration is variable in the common garter snake, but generally consists of alternating light and dark stripes. Garter snakes are non-venomous and eat insects, worms, small toads and frogs.