

Dangerously Venomous Animals

Found Around the Tucson Mountains

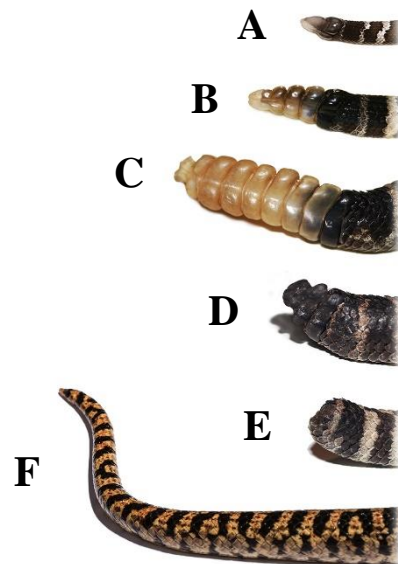
While many desert creatures, especially insects and other invertebrates, produce toxins for defense or to kill prey, only a handful are dangerous to people.

Bees, wasps, and ants – We encounter them every day, but these “social insects” kill around 50 to 100 people each year in the U.S. – more than all other venomous animals combined. It is important to recognize and avoid their nests, especially those of feral honeybees. After one or more insect stings, symptoms like itching, nausea, facial swelling, or breathing difficulty should trigger a 9-1-1 call right away, as an allergic reaction can become quickly life-threatening. Bees, wasps, and ants can be found everywhere around the Tucson Mountains, from your back yard to the grocery store parking lot.



Rattlesnakes – Part of living in the Sonoran Desert is living with rattlesnakes. Venomous snakes kill 5 or 6 people annually in the U.S., with less than 1 death per year in Arizona despite dozens of bites. Although they have a bad rap, rattlesnakes want nothing to do with creatures as large as humans. Avoid bites by being careful where you put your hands and feet when outside and by leaving rattlesnakes alone when you encounter them. Five rattlesnake species inhabit the area around the Tucson Mountains but it is more important to differentiate rattlesnakes from our many harmless snakes than to tell one kind of rattler from another. *No rattlesnake has a tapered pointed tail.* The rattle may be long, short, or (rarely) missing, but the tail is always a blunt stub. Babies have a single hard button like the eraser on a pencil. In case of a bite, call 9-1-1. First aid methods are not useful and waste time. Antivenom is the only effective treatment but must be administered in a hospital. Many local fire departments will remove venomous reptiles from your home.

- A. **Baby rattlesnake:** One small button
- B. **Young rattlesnake:** Unbroken rattle is tapered & pointed
- C. **Old rattlesnake:** No taper; older segments have broken off
- D. **All hollow segments missing:** Uncommon
- E. **Entire rattle missing:** Due to trauma; very rare
- F. **Harmless snake:** No rattlesnake has a tapered pointed tail
(But see coralsnake below)



Bark scorpions – Arizona is home to many kinds of scorpions but only one is dangerous to people. The bark scorpion is characterized by its small size – less than 2 inches long, slender appearance, and straw color. They can be numerous in some areas and invade homes that lack tight weatherstripping around doors. All scorpions have a painful sting, but bark scorpion stings are extremely sensitive to touch and pain can travel away from the sting site. Infants and toddlers are at highest risk of severe reactions, often characterized by hyperactivity and unusual eye movements. Scorpions are easily detected by searching at night with a black (UV) light.



Gila monsters – Maybe the most iconic Arizona creature is the Gila monster. These secretive lumbering lizards are probably more numerous than we realize because they spend most of their lives underground. Their bites are extraordinarily painful but do not produce permanent damage. And avoiding their bites is easy – leave them alone! Most Arizonans consider a Gila monster sighting to be a lucky event, worth some photos as the lizard goes on its way. They are strictly protected by law and, although they may appear to be lazy and slow, they are quite agile and quick to bite if bothered.



Sonoran coralsnakes – Like Gila monsters, Sonoran coralsnakes are secretive, rarely encountered, and do not bite unless handled. They are easily recognized by their distinctive black, red, and white (or pale yellow) bands, with every other band being white or yellowish. They are no more than about 2 feet long, cylindrical in shape, with tiny black heads. Sonoran coralsnakes are reluctant to bite and medically significant injuries are rare.



Spiders and other invertebrates – The desert is full of invertebrates, many of which can deliver a painful bite or sting. But the only other medically significant invertebrate in our area besides the bark scorpion is the black widow spider. Other spiders closely related to the brown recluse are found in Arizona but do not produce the injuries caused by their famous relatives found in mid-western states. Large hairy tarantulas are common here but are not dangerous, as are many smaller desert spiders.

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