It’s that time of year. The weather is delightfully mild in the evening and little rodents are out scurrying around unaware of danger, in the form of rattlesnakes, quietly waiting for an opportunity to strike.

I saw my first sidewinder of the season this evening and wanted its picture as an illustration. Unfortunately, it was stretched out, blending so well with the sandy background it was difficult to tell what it was. He/she was only about a foot long and stretched out like a long J, with a kink just past the head. Her mouth was open and close inspection showed a pink tail protruding like a tongue. She gently rattled appearing more interested in swallowing than warning me. After about 5 minutes only the tip of the tail was showing and her body movements were more agitated. I left, not wanting to disturb the digestive process.

In Joshua Tree National Park there are 25 varieties of snakes, seven of which are rattlesnakes and two of those are sidewinder species. Both sidewinders have the characteristic horns that protect the eyes when burrowing. Both also swim in the sand leaving their signature tracks.

The Mojave Desert Sidewinder is found in sandy areas and occasionally rocky areas. The Colorado Desert species is seen in the southwestern section of the park in south-facing canyons.

Although rattlesnake venom is dangerous to humans, neither the sidewinder nor other desert rattlesnake species are aggressive. They would prefer to leave you alone if you return the favor. Rattlesnakes have a unique large pit organ between each eye and nostril that can sense infrared heat. This sensitive organ allows them to deliver the correct dose of venom per the weight of the intended meal. Venom is an expensive commodity to manufacture, not to be wasted on humans too large to be ingested. The rattles, which most rattlesnakes have, are a warning device not unlike the black and white coloring of a skunk – stay away or be very sorry.

This is the time of year to be alert and listen. Should you hear the tell tale rattle sound stand still until you find the snake(s) and then move beyond the strike distance, which is less than its body length. You will know you are too close if the snake continues to rattle; back up until it stops. When safe, take the time to observe its behavior.

Also remember when climbing rocks: your fingers - grasping the rock edge above you are the size of a mouse. Lightning quick a hidden rattlesnake can sense and evaluates them as dinner. No warning.

If by some chance you are bitten do your best to remain calm and seek immediate medical attention. Cutting and attempting to suck out the venom is not effective and against all medical advice.

Although the snakes are out, they are uncommon and your chances of seeing one are small. As predators near the top of the food chain they are an important part of the desert ecosystem. If you do see one, stay calm, watch, and consider yourself fortunate.

*Rattlesnakes in other environments such as the grasslands and mountains can be very aggressive; retreat would be prudent. Bottom line: never surprise, antagonize or pickup a rattlesnake. It is well documented that snake bite victims tend to be young males showing off. Cost per bite? Google the most current $$$. Anti-venom is not cheap.