

A case of mistaken identity . . . Rattlesnakes and Gopher Snakes

Western Diamondback Rattlesnakes and Sonoran Gopher Snakes are often mistaken for each other; when that happens, it always ends badly for the Gopher Snake. They are actually easy to tell apart if you know what to look for. Rattlesnakes can be dangerous, but Gopher Snakes are completely harmless and are important rodent predators. As always, if you are not sure of any snake identification, leave it alone.

Rattlesnakes

Gopher Snakes



vertical pupils
wide, wedge-shaped head and slender neck
heat sensing "pits" between eyes and nostrils

round pupils
slender head and neck similar width
no heat sensing "pits" between eyes and nostrils



tails end with one or more rattle segments (babies - 1 "button") and variable black and white bands just before the rattles – rattles vibrate when the snake is scared

tails taper to a point and there are NO rattles or "raccoon" markings – frightened gopher snakes can vibrate their tail in leaf litter to sound like a rattlesnake



thick, heavy-bodied snake with thin neck, wide head; blotchy diamond-shaped patterns in blacks, grays and browns, ending at ringed and rattled tail

long, relatively slender snake with checkerboard patterning in light and dark brown on yellowish tan to cream background



Gopher Snakes will also try to fake you out! If threatened, they may take a striking position, flattening their head, hissing and rustling their tails in the underbrush to mimic a rattlesnake. They do this in hopes of scaring off a potential predator who won't want to mix it up with a rattler. Don't be fooled – look for the "pits", black/white tail pattern and rattles.

