

In Search of Reptiles, home and away

Text and Photos by Adrian Middleton

Time passes and it is a couple of weeks now since I returned from the Sonoran and Chihuahuan living deserts in Arizona. I have a wealth of wildlife observations to remember about my visit but one thing sticks out in my mind and that is looking for reptiles in essence requires a particular and special approach. More especially reptiles are “cold-blooded” and their longer term survival requires them to bask in some warm place especially in the morning sunshine to raise their body temperature and enable them to become active, (especially when coming out of hibernation if the winters are cold). So it’s better to venture out in the early morning sunshine or later in the day, rather than when the sun is at its hottest. It is a good idea to practise stealth with eyes peeled for some minor movement or some strange unexpected variation in the natural cover, where some snake or other might have chosen to rest.

That said, given the blazing heat of day in the desert, after potentially freezing nights, when thirst also becomes a feature it does come as something of a surprise to see certain lizards, for example, sitting out when we might be thinking anywhere else must surely be better than that (a case of adaptation?).

Perhaps the most important objective in my desert explorations was to see new snakes but more especially the Western Diamond-backed Rattlesnake, not that it is particularly rare. All I have said about searching for reptiles became very obvious when finally I saw one, drawn to my attention by our leader who demonstrated all the patience and appropriate application I have outlined. I could see this Rattlesnake’s typical markings and, as a pit viper, the pit between eye and nose used to detect infra-red heat emitted from potential prey was evident (visible on the photo). It was perfectly camouflaged. On this, my first sighting, given that disturbance of the snake was absolutely minimal it didn’t stir and there was no sight or sound of the warning rattle. So far so good.



Above: Western Diamond-backed Rattlesnake (Arizona)
Below: Adder (Affpuddle Parish)



Back home I went out onto our local heath early one morning to practice what I preached. It soon became very warm and water was a must to quench my thirst. It was only as I slowed down and concentrated that I saw an Adder (the Adder is a viper and lacks the pits described above) –a last year's young one by the look of it, hidden under some gorse bushes. The Adder and Western Diamond-backed Rattlesnake both have ridges (keels) on the scales which make them feel rough to touch. A photo was a must, but by then as was often the case, the snake was gone - the Adder illustrated here was from the same location but on an earlier occasion.

I was pleased with the outcome. Time had passed quickly and I was ready to go home again.