Snake Avoidance Training with Dogs: Making Informed Choices

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As temperatures rise in the springtime in Arizona, humans and other creatures increase their outdoor activities. Sightings of wildlife increase with an associated worry on the part of the humans about close encounters with the more dangerous types, for example Arizona’s rattlesnakes. Arizona is well-endowed with different types of rattlesnakes—at least a dozen species of which some are common (e.g., Western Diamondback) and some are rare (e.g., Ridgenose Rattlesnake, our State Reptile, by the way). All are protected or restricted under laws of the Arizona Game and Fish Department and U.S. Fish & Wildlife.

Dog owners in particular share concerns about keeping their canine companions safe when venturing into the desert and mountains for hiking, hunting, etc. Homeowners who live close to the desert and whose yards are exposed are also concerned about keeping their dogs safe. A service provided by a number of individuals that appears to be growing in popularity is called snake avoidance training. Some call it other things: snake proofing (a very misleading term), de-snaking (inaccurate at best), or just snake training (which sounds like it would take a very long time as snakes don’t seem to learn as quickly as other animals). The basic strategy involves a snake, an electronic shock collar and the dog. The purpose is to present the snake to the dog, usually several times under different conditions so that the dog is exposed to the sound, smell and look of the snake. When the dog approaches the snake, a “trainer” administers the shock, usually at one of the highest settings. The hope is that through rapid aversive conditioning, the dog will learn to associate pain and/or fear with the snake and, therefore, will avoid snakes in the future. It sounds simple, but this is actually a very complex situation that deserves careful attention. The purpose of the remainder of this article is to help dog owners make informed choices about snake avoidance training. In addition to notes about the training itself, humane treatment of all the animals involved is also emphasized. The end of the article is summarized with a series of questions dog owners should ask (and get answers) from any potential trainer. My main point of this article is that this is a choice for the owner to make, and I want to encourage the most informed choice possible. It is NOT my intention to say whether one should even attempt this training. That is entirely up to the individual dog owner.

As a native Arizonan, I believe that the ideal training for snake avoidance should occur throughout the dog’s life. Ranch dogs, full-time companion dogs of field researchers and others who spend a great deal of time out-of-doors don’t usually need special training—they learn from other dogs, from near misses and from their humans that snakes are things to leave alone. Granted, this is easier with some breeds than for others. If you have a Jack Russell or other high drive terrier, sometimes there’s nothing you can do to get them to leave snakes alone. Snake avoidance training is not for every dog. Also, snake avoidance training doesn’t always help dogs that, when working, might accidentally step on a snake while concentrating on their job. In any event, the reality of life in Arizona these days is that most people don’t spend that much time outdoors but value the weekend or early morning walks and want to do what they can to prevent a possibly life threatening experience for their dogs. Not to mention the expense of the treatment and soul-wrenching decision-making that the owners might have to go through. If you were told it would take $3000 worth of antivenin and treatment to maybe save your dog’s life, what would you do? As a staff member of a local poison and drug information center says, “Is this a dog, or is this THE dog?” Fortunately, most dogs that get bitten don’t need this level of treatment.

1 One vet estimates that most rattlesnake bite cases cost between $500 and $1200 when Ft. Dodge equine serum antivenin is used. Crofab antivenin increases the cost dramatically.
Snake avoidance training is most often recommended for people whose dogs are frequently in the field. People who are active out-of-doors or who live near the desert/suburb interface are also motivated to get the training. The costs range from $40-$80 or more and sometimes include a “free” follow-up session to make sure that the learning stuck. The trainings are frequently offered in a clinic format, with a number of people bringing their dogs to one location over a day or weekend. All trainers seem to note that this process is not guaranteed to work 100%. Many trainers attempt to conduct the training in as safe a manner as possible: safe for the human, safe for the dog. As mentioned above, the usual “presentation” of the stimulus (i.e., snake) is done in several ways where the dog is exposed separately to the sight, sound, or smell so that the dog hopefully will “get it” that this is a snake, and bad things happen to you when you approach a snake. Some trainers prefer that a “neutral” person walk the dog towards the snake (“…so that the dog won’t inadvertently lose trust in its owner…” or so that the “dog won’t get distracted by the owner”) while others merely want the shock to be administered by another person. The snake is usually a rattlesnake, and is either caged in some way, loose but defanged in some way or muzzled to ensure the safety of the dog. One might also ask about the safety of the snake through all this, and that will be discussed later. Ideally, the dog is shocked only once and figures out that snakes are to be avoided. Unfortunately, some dogs don’t seem to get it this quickly (or some trainers don’t know what they’re doing) and multiple shocks are administered. If the timing of the trainer is off by even a millisecond, the dog will not only be in pain but totally confused. Lindsay (2000, p. 321) notes that “a punisher that does not work in

3 to 5 trials should be re-evaluated and possibly abandoned.” Additionally, as noted by Dr. Dog, a San Diego behaviorist and radio personality, “…the training is not a lot of fun for the snake either.”

The key points here are that it takes a tremendous amount of knowledge about operant conditioning and the temperaments of different kinds of dogs, vast experience and extensive background about snakes, and exquisite timing to administer the right amount of pain at the precise moment to make all of this work properly. Despite what you may read on some outdoor magazine websites, this is definitely NOT a do-it-yourself operation. I’ve read on the web about hunting clubs that get together as a group with some snakes and some shock collars (and I hope no alcohol to enhance the party atmosphere) to “de-snake” their dogs. As they say on Fear Factor, do NOT try this at home. Lindsay (2000, p. 316) points out, “There is considerable risk for abuse when such collars are placed in naïve and inexperienced hands.” Not to mention the risk to the humans for getting bit by the snake themselves. Some of the potential long-term effects on the dog when the training is done improperly range from avoidance of anything remotely resembling a snake (including shadows and other innocuous things), to attacking all snakes. For some dogs, their fear becomes so great that it may interfere with their normal activities. Let the buyer beware.

One of the questions that I have always had about these trainings relates to the treatment of the snake throughout this process. As a member of the Tucson Herpetological Society and having been active in the speaker’s bureau, I’m more aware than most people, I suppose, of the misinformation and misperceptions about reptiles that exist in the general population of humans. I think that snakes, as living creatures, deserve care and consideration as well as the dog. Even for snake phobic humans, humane treatment should not be a difficult concept. Examples of horror stories abound. Snakes getting attacked by the dog going through the

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2 Another “new” item marketed to dog owners is a so-called “rattlesnake venom vaccination.” According to several veterinarians, the effectiveness of vaccine is questionable and, if works at all, for how long it would last. It also was developed for only one species of rattlesnake. It is most likely a complete waste of money for the average dog owner. See redrocksbiologic.com for the limited study the company cites.
aversive conditioning have been documented.³ Some “trainers” remove snake fangs by yanking them out with pliers⁴ and others make them “safe” by sewing their mouths shut. Neither of these are medically, ethically acceptable. Other concerns include whether the trainers keep the snake from overheating when training; and, if the trainers capture a wild snake, do they use it to earn money for a few weeks and then return it to the wild? Although this sounds as though it might not be such a bad thing, it’s actually against Arizona law (e.g., §A.R.S. 17-306; Arizona Game & Fish R12-4-428). Also, do the trainers capture a wild snake and move it to a bunch of different locations? Again, this is environmentally and ecologically bad as it can spread disease among wild populations. Furthermore, relocation usually results in the death of the relocated animal (Hare & McNally, 1997).

What else should you do?

- Know your dog. Dogs are predators. Some have more prey drive than others. You should keep your dog on leash and not let them nose around in the bushes and holes. Your dog is not supposed to be off-leash in Pima County anyway. They can bother other wildlife besides rattlesnakes. Have you ever seen the result of a dog/javalina encounter? Do you know how many desert tortoises are brought to veterinarians after being mauled by domestic dogs? Practice calling your dog to you under many conditions, every day.

- Alter your behavior. Avoid hiking with your dog during peak activity periods (e.g., April and September) or on trails with lots of weedy cover. Educate yourself about snakes and snake behavior. Most of them will stay quiet and hidden unless provoked (see above about keeping your dog on leash). Keep nighttime walks to a minimum, especially as summer temperatures rise and snakes become more nocturnal. If you do go out at night, bring a flashlight, use it, pay attention and walk around the snakes.
- Knowledge is power. Learn as much as you can. Ask lots of questions.

**QUESTIONS TO ASK A POTENTIAL TRAINER:**

- What is your experience, training and education about the following: dogs and dog behavior, snakes and snake behavior, operant conditioning? (Check for excellent knowledge and experience... not just “OK.” Do you want some yahoo administering multiple electric shocks to your dog?)

- What kind of snake is it? Where did you obtain the snake? How long have you had it? What happens to the snake once all the training is over? How many dogs are used with the one snake? How do you keep the snake on-site when you’re not training a dog? (Check for humane treatment and evidence for compliance with Arizona law about reintroduction after captivity and moving snakes in the wild (that’s a no-no). Also, they better know exactly what kind of species it is... And so should you. If it’s a rare or other protected species of rattlesnake, you should report them to Operation Game Thief at 1-800-352-0700.)

- How will the snake be presented to the dog? If de-fanged, exactly what procedure was used for that process? (If you hear the word “pliers,” “run.”)

³ The dog attacking the snake might also be an example of how the conditioning can go wrong. Lindsay (2000, p. 320) states that “… fear and anger may become motivationally linked together as a conditioned response to pain or threat of pain.” Do you want your dog to learn to attack snakes rather than avoid them? More reason to be very careful as you choose a trainer.

⁴ If you want to read more about medical procedures for venom duct ligation/ resection and venom gland removal, see the veterinary research articles cited in the references.
The bottom line is that snake avoidance training is not for every dog. If you decide to pay for someone’s services, choose your trainer carefully and wisely. Finally, keep in mind that there are larger issues to consider, both for your dog and for the other creatures involved.

References/Resources

Arizona Game & Fish Department Web Site: http://www.gf.state.az.us/ The site includes links to laws and regulations regarding Arizona wildlife.

Arizona PARC Web Site: http://reptilesofaz.com

Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center Web Site: http://www.pharmacy.arizona.edu/centers/apdic/apdic.shtml


Tucson Herpetological Society Web Site: http://tucsonherpsociety.org This site includes downloadable brochures on Living with Venomous Reptiles and others.

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