Western diamondback rattlesnakes

At up to six feet long, the western diamondback is the largest rattlesnake in Arizona. It’s also the most famous, thanks to the state’s Major League Baseball team. Yet you may have trouble spotting one in the wild. Its primary defensive behavior is to hide, blending into the desert with its lozenge-patterned, pink and granite-colored skin. On rare occasions, it warns intruders by rattling. The snake holds up its tail, which consists of hollow, empty segments of keratin—the same protein that’s in your fingernails—and shakes it back and forth more than 90 times per second, causing the segments to clatter together like maracas.

When Erika Nowak first started radio tracking western diamondback, people warned her that rattlers were aggressive and dangerous. “Within two weeks, I found that pretty much everything I’d heard about their behavior was false,” says Nowak, an assistant research professor at Northern Arizona University’s School of Earth and Sustainability. “Rattlesnakes are not aggressive. They’re actually really shy.”

Hikers might happen upon a diamondback between March and October on trails at lower elevations around the state. The Boyce Thompson Arboretum in Superior reports frequent sightings. All rattlesnakes are venomous and some are potentially deadly, so it’s essential to keep your distance. If you see or hear one, leave it alone and stay at least 10 feet away, Nowak advises.

The safest way to observe a western diamondback is in captivity. The Phoenix Zoo typically exhibits all 13 species of rattlesnake native to Arizona. If it’s closed, you can watch an online presentation by the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum’s savvy professional handlers, or tour the Phoenix Herpetological Sanctuary, which also offers courses to area residents on how to relocate stray rattlers.