

# Brothers make a living at removing rattlesnakes from yards, homes

By Hudson Sangree, Sacramento Bee

Just above the tract homes of Empire Ranch, on a Folsom hillside covered in boulders and brown grass, Bruce Ramirez plies his trade: keeping the suburbs safe from rattlesnakes.

Greenbelts and golf courses are particularly hazardous, he said. In the past week or so, he and his brother Len have pulled about 50 rattlesnakes from around Northern California homes.

In the foothills, where suburbia and prime snake habitat intersect, homebuilding is picking up again after a long hiatus. That's disturbing more rattlers. And with summer temperatures lingering into fall, young snakes, whose bite can be the most dangerous, are numerous and active.

"It's beautiful country," Ramirez said. "People want to live here, too. I guess we have something in common with snakes."

It's not an easy coexistence.

The slithering of rattlers onto suburban lots – biting pets, frightening children – creates demand for snake catchers such as Ramirez Rattlesnake Removal. The brothers' clients include homeowners, schools, high-tech companies and hospitals.

The Ramirez brothers have removed snakes tucked behind toilets, coiled in bedrooms and lurking under TVs. More times than they would like, they've come face to face with rattlers in the narrow spaces under houses while crawling on their bellies.

"The babies are out in high numbers right now," Bruce Ramirez said.

In Empire Ranch, a new development in Folsom, homeowners routinely call Bruce Ramirez to rid their yards of snakes. He has traced the creatures to their hillside dens and captured dozens.

Last week, he handed his card to Elisa and Manuel Cordero in the driveway of their Folsom home and suggested some preventive measures, such as sealing garage doors and keeping landscaping clean and open.

The Corderos have lived in Folsom for six years, during which time they've had a number of snake encounters. Once, Elisa Cordero killed a rattler with a shovel. Another time, her husband shot one with a BB gun after their 6-year-old granddaughter heard its rattle while playing in the backyard.

One day, they said, their 9-year-old grandson pounded on the front door after school, yelling and frightened. Elisa opened the door and saw a big rattler coiled in the corner, an arm's length from the boy.

The couple moved from Citrus Heights and were surprised by the number of snakes. They didn't hear about the rattlers from sales agents. A prospective neighbor told them, "There's critters," and left it at that, they said.

Northern Pacific rattlesnakes are common in growing suburbs such as Lincoln, Folsom and Granite Bay. The upscale community of El Dorado Hills is the epicenter of snake sightings, Len Ramirez said.

"We call it 'Snake-orado,'" he said.

Bruce Ramirez told the story of a call to a home in Serrano, a gated community in El Dorado Hills. The family dog had been bitten overnight and refused to come inside. When Ramirez got

there, he realized the reason: The snake was indoors with the family, including a 3-year-old child.

“The dog knew better than to go back in the house,” he said.

As of last Wednesday, the 50 snakes recently removed by the Ramirez brothers were stored in holding tanks at Len Ramirez’s Auburn home. He planned to take them into the mountains and release them, as he does with almost all the snakes he catches.

Patrick Foy, a spokesman for the state Department of Fish and Game, said the department has an informal agreement with Len Ramirez that allows him to distribute rattlesnakes on public wild lands.

Foy said state law gives residents “carte blanche” to do what they will with rattlesnakes – kill them, catch them – with no permit required. The snakes, native to this area, are not protected as either threatened or endangered.

Despite the law’s treatment of rattlesnakes as pests, the Ramirez brothers said they respect their quarry – in part for the vital role snakes play in controlling the state’s rodent population.

“We move onto their property, but we really need them,” Bruce Ramirez said.

Len Ramirez pulled out a bucket of small rattlers, youngsters that were born in late summer or early autumn.

They look almost harmless, and they are much harder to spot than older snakes, he said. But their bite can be the most dangerous, because they have yet to make a kill and cleanse their venom ducts.

“They can discharge more venom,” Len Ramirez said.

Children and dogs are especially in danger from the small

rattlers, which they tend to approach with less caution.

“You wake up in the morning and your dog’s head is the size of a melon,” he said.

Using snake tongs, Len Ramirez pulled out a 3-foot rattlesnake he caught last week at the Twelve Bridges community in Lincoln. It coiled and rattled as he set it on the grass.

The snake was one of hundreds he has pulled from Twelve Bridges over the years. When the community’s golf course was being built, he said he removed 800 from that area alone.

Twelve Bridges is part of a snake zone that extends across the foothills of Placer, Sacramento and El Dorado counties. Over in El Dorado Hills, John Carle has called Bruce Ramirez to his house several times to remove rattlesnakes. His house sits at the end of a cul-de-sac, adjacent to open space. He said he’s seen hundreds of rattlers.

When he moved to the area 10 years ago, Carle said, new construction caused a mini-plague of snakes. Neighbors had dozens in their yards. Now the snake sightings have tapered off, and residents tend to take snakes in stride.

His Labrador retriever, Jackson, has been bitten four times, but Carle thinks he’s finally learned his lesson. “If he hears a rattle,” Carle said, “he’ll back up.”