

Air Currents

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SMALL BUT DEADLY

When a five-year-old Sisters boy meets with a juvenile rattlesnake, the consequences could be fatal

Tears pricked the back of Chris Gurney's eyes as her five-year-old son, Jacob, began singing softly to himself.

"Just say ow, say it now, just say ow and it's over"

It was a line from a children's book, one Chris had read to her four small children to teach them to cope with pain. But this was no bedtime story. As Chris choked back the tears, a paramedic inserted an IV in her son's arm and began battling the rattlesnake venom poisoning Jacob's tiny body.

Last June 1 had started like any other in the Gurney household. It was a sunny morning, and the four children had trooped outside to play on the family's wooded acre near Sisters. When three of them came in, Chris wasn't particularly surprised that Jacob — her independent, outdoor-loving five-year-old — stayed outside by himself.

But then Chris heard the scream.

"I started running toward him and he ran inside, so we met at the middle of the house," she said. "He was holding out his thumb and I thought he said 'snake.'"

Snake. A wave of horror washed through Chris. She knew without a doubt her son had been bitten by a rattlesnake. "The phone was right there," she said. "I picked it up and I put my arm around Jacob and I dialed 911."

Fighting the urge to panic, Chris held Jacob's hand low to keep the venom below his heart. She knew her best defense was to keep her son calm, so she held him tightly and waited for help to arrive. She also dialed her husband, Jim, on his cell phone.

Jim was less than a mile from the house when the call came. He heard the terror



Jacob Gurney, now 6, shows his sister, Emma, 7, where he found the rattlesnake. Below, what's left of the juvenile rattlesnake that bit Jacob last June.

in his wife's voice as she explained what had happened. "Right away, I feared the worst," Jim admitted. "I just started praying immediately, and I didn't stop."

A team from Sisters-Camp Sherman RFPD arrived within 10 minutes. According to Paramedic Captain Jeremy Ast, this was the first rattlesnake call in the program's history, so he and his team calmly reviewed protocol as the ambulance navigated the winding roads toward the Gurney home.

Top Tips for Avoiding Rattlesnake Bites

- ◆ Always wear shoes or boots. Boots and long pants can provide you with a great deal of protection.
- ◆ Use a flashlight at night to avoid stepping on snakes.
- ◆ Do not place your hand on a rock ledge or outcropping above eye level where a snake may be resting.
- ◆ Be cautious when approaching rocks, bushes, or other objects where a snake may have sought shade.
- ◆ Set up your campsite in an open area.
- ◆ Stay on trails and avoid walking in heavy underbrush.
- ◆ If you hear a rattlesnake, stay calm and try to locate the snake's position. Move away slowly.

"Shortly after I arrived at the scene, I did a quick assessment of the patient and called the ER physician at St. Charles," he said. "I told him what had happened and that we were looking at about a 45-minute transport time. I asked if he recommended Air Life, and he said yes."

The medics needed to be certain they were dealing with a rattlesnake bite, so Jacob's dad went with Scott Michalek — a neighbor and volunteer firefighter who had been first at the scene — to search for the snake. For the panicked father, it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. But in a miracle Jim credits to the power of prayer, the two men quickly found the juvenile rattlesnake.

"When we saw it was a baby I thought that was better, but they said that wasn't a good thing," Jim recalled. "Juvenile rattlesnakes can also be incredibly deadly."

HATS OFF



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2500 NE Neff Rd.
Bend, Oregon 97701