

Rockdale Citizen

Little snake makes a big ruckus at RMC

Woman bitten by copperhead attracts TV crew

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Friday, August 01, 2008



Staff Photos: Robert Porter

Newly named copperhead snake "Angie" sent Rockdale County resident Sandy Butler to Rockdale Medical Center on Wednesday after biting her on the hand.



A film crew for the cable channel Animal Planet interviews Rockdale County resident Sandy Butler in her hospital room Thursday as she recuperates from a copperhead snake bite. Butler talks with Dr. Angela Mattke of RMC emergency department as the film crew tapes their conversation.

CONYERS - Sandy Butler said Wednesday evening was the first time she helped her husband, Tom, move a snake out of their yard. It may also be the last time she'll help him, after the snake, a young copperhead, bit her on her right hand and landed her in the emergency department at Rockdale Medical Center.

Her experience kept her in the hospital for a few days, but not before a television crew for the cable channel Animal Planet showed up as they followed a snake rescuer for an upcoming program.

Snakes in their yard are not uncommon, Butler said. The couple's three dogs had found the snake, and the Butlers thought they should move the snake to a safe area and avoid bothering the dogs - something Tom had done several times before. Butler said she was lowering a glass jar near the snake when it struck.

"As soon as the snake hit my hand, I obviously knew," said Butler, who lives in the Whispering Pines subdivision in north Rockdale County. "We were not sure if it was venomous or not, and I said 'I think we're going to find out, because it just hit me.'"

Her hand swelled up almost moments after the bite. They called 911 and an ambulance took Butler to the hospital where she received anti-venom treatment.

However, the couple brought the small copperhead with them to the emergency department, just in case. Dr. Angela F. Mattke at the RMC emergency department received the Butlers and quickly had Sandy Butler under treatment. Afterward, Mattke said several of her co-workers, not surprisingly, wanted her to get rid of the copperhead, and even kill it.

Instead, Mattke called Jason Clark of Southeastern Reptile Rescue to retrieve the copperhead.

"The snake was just doing what snakes do," Mattke said. "If the snake had been in a house, then that would have been a different story. But the snake was just outside on wooded property and doing what it was supposed to do, so I didn't feel that the snake deserved to die."

Clark explained that copperhead bites are probably the most common snake bite seen in Georgia by people accidentally stepping on them because their coloring makes them hard to see and, as in Butler's case, people attempting to capture them.

"She did exactly what you're supposed to do when bitten by a venomous snake; she didn't wait around but went straight to the hospital," Clark said. "Messing around with tourniquets or ice packs doesn't help and could make the situation worse. Getting medical attention as quickly as possible is the best way to treat a snake bite."

It was a coincidence that Clark was being shadowed by the Animal Planet film crew to capture his interactions with snakes and other reptiles. Clark's group answers calls for reptile removal around the clock and has handled alligators and every venomous and nonvenomous snake native to Georgia.

Clark said he cautions people from having contact with snakes, especially venomous ones. He also tells people not to kill snakes, and that they provide more benefit than trouble in keeping vermin in check. He offers several ways to discourage snakes from around the house at his group's Web site, www.snakesareus.com.

The filming crew declined to go into detail about which program they were filming for or a possible air time, explaining they were there only to follow Clark and his staff around for a future and unnamed project for the cable channel.

Clark said the young copperhead, still in the pickle jar the Butlers used to catch it, will be a welcome addition to the rescue group's snake collection and will become a part of the group's education seminars conducted throughout the year, including one scheduled for the Haynes Creek Wildlife Festival on Aug. 23-24 at the Georgia International Horse Park.

Clark named the snake "Angie" in honor of Dr. Mattke.