

# The Biggest Snake I Ever Saw

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It's summer in Santiago. Chaparral, oak, sycamore and sagebrush heat up and smell like the centuries before air-conditioning.

Benny has a big straw hat on. He looks like a lifeguard. Andy is wearing jeans pulled up to his knees.

We walk.

There's some tight, single tracks around these parts. It's mid-morning and there are no clouds.

Andy wants to hit the summit. I'm down for whatever.

The single track connects to a dirt road. We amble up the road then stop dead in our tracks.

"Woah," says Andy.

Benny replies, "Check it out."

A big diamondback, it's body the width of my leg, slides across the road like sludge. It's entire length stretches across the road.

I tell them "That's a rattler."

We wait.

Snakes are just like any other animal. They're affectionate, caring, calm and viscous. If you leave them alone, they'll be alright. If you threaten them in their world, like us humans, they get cranky.

There is no rattle to be heard so after the road is clear, we cross, continue our hike and retell our encounter with the biggest snake Benny ever saw in Santiago.

Benny is Andy's older brother. When we were children, Benny tormented, tortured and humiliated us. Benny and his friends gave us wedgies, noogies, threw fireworks at us, chased us with baseball bats on slippery concrete around the pool, hucked chickenshit at us, drowned us in kool-aid, flattened our tires, tore our shirts and gave us a really hard time just because they could.

Did I say could? I meant should. What would life be without Benny? Boring.

Decades later, Andy says Benny feels bad and always treats us with respect.

One time, he rescued me from a conversation with a loquacious old man. That old man was once a prominent librarian our home town. That old man was also his grandpa.

"I stacked up a wall of books as tall as my hip and the newspaper came and took a photo. I told them 'This is how many books are stolen from the library!'"

Benny comes over and asks if I want a drink and to come outside. I do.

Good save.

Benny and Andy continue to be my best friends despite the distance between us.

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It's May in Los Angeles. If you take Crenshaw all the way to the ocean you reach the Portuguese Bend. There are many trails here. Edith and Esteban meet us at the trailhead where hikers gather to lace up their Nikes, boots and Vans of course. I'm never on a trail where I don't see the waffle sole Vans footprint. Sometimes, if I'm lucky, I make believe it's 1966 and Vans are blowing up.

Anything to pass the time.

Danielle, Esteban, Edith and I descend onto the Portuguese Bend. There is thick chaparral here next to the ocean. The wilderness is covered with fog, bird song, and clouds that burn away moderately. There's a heatwave. The beginning of summer is near. The nights are still cool. The humidity is thick.

We hike through the brush, wander around and eventually find the shore where low tide exposes pools bustling with life. I look behind me toward land, a bluff towers over me, my group is spread out along the rocky shore. Clouds break, blue skies, the colors of the rainbow fill my eyes. The bend is beautiful today.

We're on our way back when a hiker stops us.

"Okay!" She's frantic. "There's a corner and just after the corner there's a huge rattlesnake. It's...be really careful! Okay?"

"Thanks!"

We slow our pace.

Now, the bend is filling up and heating up at the same time. As a hiker, this is why I normally let one or two people get out ahead of me. Less dawn patrol and more breakfast, these days. I try not to hike especially when it's hot because of one thing. One thing keeps me off the trails more than most things: snakes. Above that, only weather.

If you have one, you may end up with both. When it starts to heat up around May I always remember what happened next at Portuguese Bend.

We round the corner, see a bush shake and look down.

All of us watch as a cottontail rabbit's legs are slowly dragged from the trail into the abyss.

It's something out of a horror flick.

We continue our walk knowing that the snakes are out today.

We come to a section of the trail where the caretakers of this land erected poles and lines to keep humans from trampling this fortunate landscape. It is lush here.

I take the lead.

I spot something in the brush, jump and scurry to the middle of the pack.

"Holy shit! Snake!"

Another rattler?

We inch closer. This black snake is trying to intimidate us. It's head is up as if it could strike. Still, no rattle.

One by one we run past it. I don't have rocks or a stick otherwise this would've been over.

Esteban declares, "I think we're done today. Snakes got us."

I agree.

We head back to the car. I wonder how big the rattler is who took the rabbit. I'll never forget those little white, pointed legs being dragged to hell.

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It's April. I'm ready for a few nights alone in the wild. I book an overnight at El Capitan and plan to hit SESPE.

I roll up to Santa Barbara in my tank, stop for a beer and bag of chips in Carpinteria, grab a fish taco, buy some new shorts and some cheap binoculars, then find my campsite. I'm on a paved bluff with two other RVs. I reconfigure my gear in a rooftop bag and make a bed inside the tank to sleep in.

I walk around, snap some photos, meet my neighbors and take it all in. There's an enormous meadow directly in front of me. I gaze out at the ocean and play my guitar. My neighbor does the same.

He walks over.

"Thirty years ago we used to camp here and only hear one or two cars on 101 the entire night."

"Say, how's living in that thing?"

"Well, people don't want it in their driveway. I park it at Wal Mart sometimes. RVs are great."

"I like tents."

"I used to."

He's wearing flip flops with socks. What a man.

I think he wants to jam so I put my guitar away. I don't mind jamming but he might start singing. The worst thing a guitar player can do is open his mouth. Listen to Roy Buchanan play his axe and you'll be blown away. Listen to him sing and you'll cringe. Roy killed himself by the way. God rest his soul.

The same goes for John Mayer, Eric Clapton, and Kurt Cobain. They can't sing.

I walk the beach, campsite, then return.

"You'd hate it here during summer. This lot would be full of us with our generators going!"

My neighbor is cool. I hope I see him before I leave.

I get loaded on some legal sedatives and bed down after dark. As soon as I put my permit in the window and lay my head on the pillow a bright light shines inside the car.

A State Park Ranger rolls up on me.

I get out all wiggled out from the sedatives.

"Howsit? I just put my pass in the window."

"How are ya? These are RV only sites. You gotta be self contained."

"Oh man, I'm really sorry. I booked it and didn't really check."

"You're good. They might close the bathrooms over there but not tonight."

"Oh okay. Thanks."

I keep rambling.

"I'm from OC. I'm hitting SESPE tomorrow so I'll be outta your hair."

"You're good."

"You probably get a lot of weirdos trying to car camp."

At this point I realize he gave me a pass so I shut up.

"Ah yeah. You're cool. I appreciate you."

"Thanks brotha. Take care."

I get some sleep.

The next morning I catch my neighbor who unhooks his little Honda CR-V from his RV.

"We're taking the bikes to Goleta. The butterfly reserve lets you bike around."

"Sweet. I'll have to check that out. Take care!"

He and his wife head south. I pack up and head in after I talk to the camp host who stops by. She tells me to pop into an empty tent-site next time to avoid the ranger.

I take the route from 101 to Lake Casitas, snap some photos, trail some motorcyclists, stop in Ojai for lunch then drive to Rose Valley. I walk SESPE for a bit. The creek is refreshing. I hang out on a beach for a minute. This is one of the last untouched creeks in California. Why are beaches so relaxing? I've never been on a beach and thought, "Man, I'd love to go to war right now." I usually think about ice cream. I walk the river trail and cross the creek a few times. I realize how remote it is out here and easily clear my head. At this point in time I am a dude by a river. I join the ranks of other dudes by rivers around the world. There are men, women, grandpas, aunts, uncles, cousins, doctors, accountants, meter maids, lifeguards, sunglass designers, male models, hand models, information security officers, gurus, rabbis, and animals of all sorts by the river all around. Here I am alone, so I think.

After spying some large sandstone cliffs up the trail I return to camp. I feel like I've been gone a decade.

I return to camp. I back the tank into my site and look around my claim.

The grass moves.

Slowly, the head of a snake appears.

A long, black rattler appears. It's the biggest snake I ever saw.

Size isn't everything. This snake is bold.

I throw rocks his way, careful not to harm my camp mate. I don't like to harm an animal if I don't have to but I have to send a message.

Like a coyote in the suburbs, please let animals know that you're around. Yell, haze and run at them if you can.

In this case, rocks served me. The rattler went off.

The grass moves again. The rattler peaks into my campsite again. More rocks. Still, the rattler keeps comin' back.



I start to think. Maybe it knows something I don't.

It's black scales make me think it just molted. It's tail and length of its rattle tells me its not young but not old.

I think it's trying to get to the water source that's running behind camp. I let it go.

Nature finds its way.

My rocks got in its way. Now the rattler is free to get a move on. It has no business in my campsite. Right then and there I decide I'm sleeping in the tank again.

My neighbors are setting up camp. They're a little younger than I am and have dogs. There's six of them. Three dudes and three dudettes are hanging out when I walk up.

"Hey neighbors. You might want to leash your pups. I've got a rattler in my camp."

"Can we see it!?"

"Sure thing. Name's Sal."

They come over. One of 'em wears a big knife on his hip. I think he looks badass. We examine camp. Big Knife hangs out while the others go back to makin' camp their home. He likes my setup. I pour water out of my jug.

"Is that like, a pump system?"

"Gravity," I say.

"I've never seen a snake like that. Is it dangerous?"

"It's the most dangerous snake in North America. If not, it's at least top-five.

Later, I bring my neighbors a beer. I drink too much and get a horrible night of sleep atop my sleeping pad. The night before my pad is fine. Tonight it busts and a huge bubble forms in the middle. I wake up at sunrise, enjoy camp, hike to the waterfall and drive home to spend time with family.

That's the story of the biggest snake I ever saw.