

Webcam monitors hundreds of rattlesnakes at a Colorado 'mega den' for citizen science

July 17 2024, by MEAD GRUVER and KENDRIA LaFLEUR



This undated image made from a video provided by Project RattleCam shows a "mega den" of rattlesnakes in a remote location in northern Colorado. California Polytechnic State University scientists recently put up a webcam on the den, which they say is one of the biggest they've ever seen. Credit: Project RattleCam via AP

They creep, slither and slide over and around each other by the dozen and now there's a webcam so that anybody can watch them online at any

time, even at night.

A "mega den" with as many as 2,000 [rattlesnakes](#) isn't top binge-watching for many people. But it's a [viewing bonanza](#) for scientists and other snake enthusiasts whose observations are helping to broaden understanding of these unusual—and undeservedly maligned—reptiles.

The remote site on [private land](#) in northern Colorado is on a hillside full of rock crevices where the snakes can keep warm and hide from predators.

"This is a big, big den for rattlesnakes. This is one of the biggest ones we know of," Emily Taylor, a California Polytechnic State University biology professor leading the Project RattleCam research, said Tuesday.

The Cal Poly researchers set up the [webcam](#) in May, working off their knowledge from a previous webcam they set up at a rattlesnake den in California. The exact location in Colorado is kept secret to discourage snake lovers—or haters—from messing with the snakes, Taylor said.

The high-elevation Colorado rattlesnakes take refuge in the den for winter and emerge in the spring for a short season of activity compared to rattlesnakes in the Southwest. This time of year, only pregnant female snakes are at the den while males and not-pregnant females move into the lower country nearby.



This image provided by Emily Taylor shows the weather station and camera setup, which are part of the Cal Poly research and community service initiative, Project RattleCam, in northern Colorado, in May 2024. The camera is live streaming a "mega den" of rattlesnakes. Credit: Emily Taylor/Project RattleCam via AP

In August, the babies will be born. They're called pups and, unlike nearly all other reptiles, they do not hatch from eggs but are born alive.

Also unlike other snakes, rattlesnake mothers care for their young, protecting them against predators and shielding them with their bodies. Sometimes rattlesnakes even care for the young of others.

"Rattlesnakes are actually really good mothers. People don't know that," Taylor said.

A webcam helps scientists observe snake behavior without interfering. Meanwhile, people watching online tip off scientists to events they miss, or clue them in with their own knowledge about the local environment.

"It truly is a group effort, a community science effort, that we couldn't do on our own as scientists," Taylor said.

Now and then, there's drama.

Red-tailed hawks circle above, awaiting a chance to swoop in for a meal. Once a magpie—a relative of crows with black, white and blue coloring and a [long tail](#)—caught a baby rattlesnake.



This undated image made from a video provided by Project RattleCam shows a "mega den" of rattlesnakes in a remote location in northern Colorado. California Polytechnic State University scientists recently put up a webcam on the den, which they say is one of the biggest they've ever seen. Credit: Project RattleCam via AP

When it rains, the rattlesnakes coil up and catch water to drink from the cups formed by their bodies.

Taylor expects a surge in activity after the pups are born—then even more in September as snakes return from surrounding areas in preparation for winter.

Rattlesnakes get a bum rap as creepy and threatening. But the webcam shows they're [social animals](#) that don't go out of their way to be aggressive, Taylor pointed out.

"I try to speak up for the underdog and to show people that rattlesnakes have this other side that's really worthy of our admiration," said Taylor.

© 2024 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: Webcam monitors hundreds of rattlesnakes at a Colorado 'mega den' for citizen science (2024, July 17) retrieved 16 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-07-webcam-hundreds-rattlesnakes-colorado-mega.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.