

- Rattlesnake Safety: Ask an Avoidance Dog Trainer

Vanessa Eveleth ('23) – From a scary experience to a mission of awareness and education, Westminster alum **Melissa Thomas (MPC '09)** started providing rattlesnake avoidance training for Utah dog owners in 2019. Today, she has a free online awareness course and offers seasonal paid courses to teach dogs and dog owners alike how to avoid rattlesnakes using positive reinforcement.

In Melissa's youth, she carelessly ran past a rattlesnake in Southern Utah while on a hike. Melissa was lucky; the rattler coiled, struck, and missed her ankle as she breezed by.

When she adopted her Husky, Melissa worried about how to best protect her dog from rattlesnakes. This fear led her to research and educate herself about rattlesnakes. She discovered avoidance training which uses the principals of positive reinforcement and proactive behavior responses.

After training her dog, Melissa gathered tools to teach avoidance training to other dog owners. She researched the field and registered for a Train the Trainer course from another professional dog trainer, then began spreading awareness of this positive form of training dogs to avoid rattlesnakes and keep them safe. You can learn more on her website [Training to a T, LLC](#).

Melissa answers some questions about rattlesnakes in Utah and how to keep our dogs safe.

Why should dog owners be aware of rattlesnakes in Utah?

"Dog owners should be aware of rattlesnakes, but not afraid of them. They need to be aware rattlesnakes are out there, especially here in Northern Utah. The main one that we have is the Great Basin Rattlesnake; and they are venomous. They have two little fangs, and if they attack the dog, it will swell up and is obviously going to create a reaction. It can be a fairly bad reaction up to and including death of the dog.

Before you go hiking, it's something that you want to be prepared for and be aware that those rattlesnakes are out there. Before you spend time up in the mountains, just educate yourself. Know what type of environments rattlesnakes are going to be in and what you can do to help prevent a bite from happening to either you or your dog. It's also a really great idea to locate the nearest vet to where you will be hiking in case you need to take your dog in."

What's the most common mistake people make when they encounter a snake, possibly a venomous rattlesnake?

"One mistake that I hear about the most is throwing rocks and other objects at the snake. It's a natural reaction: There's a snake there. I need to somehow get it to move off the trail. So, you pick up a stick or a rock, and you toss it towards the snake in hopes that it will scurry off. Sometimes that may happen. Sometimes it will just tick off the snake and it'll go into its little coil posture. When rattlesnakes go into the coil, that is when they're preparing to strike.

To avoid a striking snake, you want to control what you can, which is you and your dog in that situation. When you see a snake, you need to physically move yourself and your dog away from the snake."

What is a dog's usual reaction to a rattlesnake, or the different possible reactions when they encounter one?

"Every dog is different. Some dogs may be afraid of them naturally. Some dogs that have a higher prey or chase drive will actually want to go forward, especially if the snake is moving. Other dogs may completely ignore it. So, it just ultimately depends on your dog, and that's where the training comes in. You can help train your dog to understand what to do in that situation. The worst-case scenario, the worst possible reaction we've seen the dogs have is going toward the snake. That's what we really want to focus the training—to leave those snakes alone as you're outdoors.

You never really know how your dog will react and that's the tough part. If you have a mellow dog, you might be comfortable hiking without the training. But you just honestly, never really know when you're going to get into a situation. It's always good to have at least some baseline training, even if it's not rattlesnake, even just a basic "leave it" cue."

How can dog owners protect themselves and the dogs from rattlesnakes? What can you do as in being in control?

"As far as the human side of it goes, we need to be really aware of our own surroundings. This means you're listening for leaves and possibly rustling where the snakes could potentially be. Know where the snakes have a tendency to hide like under rocks, in bushes, or under leaves. That's really where the education comes in: doing your own research, understanding the snake as an animal, and what their tendencies are. Snakes don't want to hurt you and will only strike as a last ditch effort, so giving them space is the best thing you can do if you see one.

Then, as far as your dogs go, the best thing you can do for your dog to keep them safe is to keep 'em on a leash. For the people that do like to let their dogs off of the leash, if that's the case, then you really need to have some sort of training for your dog.

Without that leash, you're relinquishing what control you as the human have as far as a physical tether to the dog. You're having to rely on that positive communication between you and your dog and that is where the human-animal bond really can play a big part. You really want to build that bond up, not just for companionship purposes and for the love between a human and an animal, but you want to build that bond up so your dog will listen to you in an emergency situation: when you're out hiking, dogs are not on a leash, and they're in the vicinity of a rattlesnake. Because, in these realms, where you may encounter a snake that bond is going to be the key on whether or not your dog chooses to listen to you or chooses to investigate the rattlesnake."

How do you encourage proactive training instead of reactive training?

"Proactive training is when we take the rattlesnake situation and teach dogs what to do in that situation: We're now hiking. There is a snake, a hundred yards up the trail. You are going to get to a point where your dog can pick up the scent of the snake. It may or may not be moving across the trail. It may or may not be rattling. We're going to use rattlesnake scent and teach the dog that scent is not something to engage with. "This is how I want you to behave." So if they see the snake, they smell the snake, or maybe they hear the snake, whichever one that happens to be, the dogs know to move away from the area and the snake.

Reactive training in the snake world is where people let the dog approach the snake, and then they zap the dog with a shock collar. They let the incident happen, if you will, and then they zap it, or correct/punish the dog. And then by doing that, it creates a negative, fear-based association with the snake, or at least they hope so. If you zap the dog at the wrong time, the fallout can be very scary and set the stage for many behavior-based problems later on. Training based on fear and punishment has a much higher failure rate and carries many more risks than the proactive, or positive, approach."

What are some reasons you thought the Westminster community would benefit from your expertise?

"Being an alumni of Westminster, I know the community is super into the outdoors. This is the community that I, as a dog trainer with the rattlesnake avoidance training, would like to get in touch with—to help educate and teach these aspects of rattlesnakes and staying safe outdoors.

My major goal is obviously training the dogs to stay away from the snakes. But my lesser goal in doing this is to help alleviate the general fear and misunderstanding of the snakes out there, and to build a greater respect for the snakes as a whole.

I want to support the Westminster community, and the greater hiking and outdoors community of our state in learning about snakes, learning about avoidance, keeping everybody safe, including the snake, and coming together as a society and as a community for the greater good of all species.