

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

EASTERN DIAMONDBACK RATTLESNAKE

In mid-September, I received e-mails and phone calls about sightings of one of Florida's most magnificent and iconic animals — the Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake. Some sightings represented newborn individuals, both in Victoria Hills and Victoria Gardens (some were mis-identified as Pygmy Rattlesnakes). But a few sightings were of large, mature adult rattlesnakes (also in the Hills and Gardens). The most likely explanation: at least one adult female gave birth in each of the 2 Victoria Park communities. September is the month when pregnant diamondbacks commonly give birth to

their live young.

The Eastern Diamondback is the world's largest rattlesnake and, by weight, our country's heaviest snake. The record length is exactly 8 feet, and probably weighed well over 15 pounds. It's an unmistakable snake: yellowish or olive-gray with conspicuous black, white-outlined diamonds running from head to tail. Two diagonal lines are present on each side of the face, and, of course, there is the rattle at the tip of the tail, to which another segment is added each time the snake sheds its skin.

Remarkably camouflaged, the diamondback is superbly adapted to hiding in the palmettos, pines, or coastal grasses waiting for a rabbit or rodent to come along. People can (and sometimes do) walk right by one of these snakes on woodland trails and never see it, and, fortunately, the rattler won't strike unless it is imminently threatened with being attacked or caught.

Although the Eastern Diamondback is potentially dangerous because of its toxic venom, it is not aggressive and deserves to be left alone in its natural habitat. It is a living symbol of the wild southeastern U.S., and it would be extremely sad and shameful to have this part of our natural heritage disappear from our wild areas. If you see one of these impressive animals in your neighborhood or along our roads, please call me (386-218-4018) and I'll relocate it to a safe conservation area.