

# Northern Pacific Rattlesnake (*Crotalus oreganus oreganus*) trapped in a tar seep near McKittrick, Kern County, California

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The McKittrick tar pits are a series of natural asphalt lakes situated in the western part of Kern County in southern California (about 50 km [31 mi] west of Bakersfield and 0.8 km [0.5 mi] south of the town of McKittrick; San Joaquin Valley Geology 2015). Most of the tar pits are located along the southwestern part of the intersection of California State Route 58 and 33 and generate from the underlying McKittrick Oil Field. The pits stretch over a distance of about 6.5 km (4.0 mi; San Joaquin Valley Geology 2015). Wildlife species can easily become ensnared in the pits, as the asphalt tar is sticky and once an animal is trapped, additional struggling will only lead to further entrapment. Here, we describe a Northern Pacific Rattlesnake (*Crotalus oreganus oreganus* = *Crotalus viridis oreganus*; Holbrook, 1840) trapped in the tar pit.

On 31 March 2019, we were inspecting the tar seep flows for trapped wildlife. During the survey we found a Northern Pacific Rattlesnake and an unidentified passerine bird (Figs. 1 and 2) trapped in the tar seep. Both succumbed to the incapacitating nature of the tar. The snake appeared to be fairly fresh and likely trapped only a few days prior to our detection. The bird was possibly trapped prior to the snake as it was completely covered in tar. It is unknown if the trapped bird attracted the snake or if the snake was simply trying to cross the tar seep.

The McKittrick tar pits are well known for their fossil inventory. Brattstrom (1953) reported several Pleistocene reptile species being identified in the tar, including *Gopherus agassizii*, *Clemmys marmorata* (= *Actinemys marmorata*), *Eumeces* (= *Plestiodon*), *Elgaria*, *Sceloporus*, and *Gambelia*. The rattlesnake fossils found in the tar



**Fig. 1.** Northern Pacific Rattlesnake (*Crotalus oreganus oreganus*) fatally caught in McKittrick asphalt tar. Photo by Howard Clark, Kern County, CA.

pits were identified as *Crotalus viridis* (= *Crotalus oreganus*). It is likely that reptiles are a common entrapment victim of the tar pits.

## Literature Cited

- Brattstrom, B.H. 1953. Records of Pleistocene reptiles from California. *Copeia* 1953:174-179.  
 Holbrook, J.E. 1840. *Crotalus oreganus*. *North American Herpetology* 4:115-117.  
 San Joaquin Valley Geology. 2015. [http://www.sjvgeology.org/geology/tarpits\\_geol.html](http://www.sjvgeology.org/geology/tarpits_geol.html) [Accessed: 5 May 2019]



**Fig. 2.** Northern Pacific Rattlesnake (*Crotalus oreganus oreganus*) fatally caught in McKittrick asphalt tar, shown in context. Note the passerine bird (unknown species) above the snake (red ellipse). Photo by Howard Clark, Kern County, CA.

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