

Midland man charged in rattlesnake killing

Snake found dead on Beausoleil Island had its head crushed

BY RAYMOND BOWE

A Midland-area man has been charged following an investigation into the deliberate killing of an eastern massasauga rattlesnake on Beausoleil Island in Georgian Bay Islands National Park.

The species is listed as a threatened species in the National Parks Act.

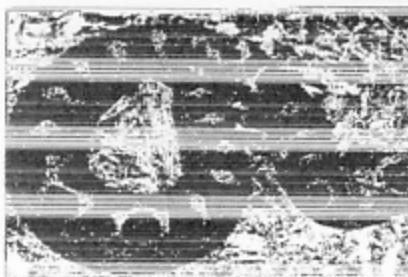
The 32-year-old man was charged with poaching a protected species in a national park, said Mark McIntyre, senior park warden.

The dead adult female snake was found discarded near the water's edge after the Canada Day long weekend. McIntyre said the snake was likely encountered and pursued before being bludgeoned to death.

A necropsy performed by park staff determined its head was crushed, there were multiple fractures to the spine and ribs, and it had numerous internal injuries.

An investigation was undertaken and park staff interviewed a number of people who were at the park that weekend, said McIntyre.

"It took a bit of time, but we had to drive to places like Toronto, Parry Sound and Midland," said McIntyre, noting the investigation involved five



CP FILE PHOTO

A Midland-area man has been charged with the recent killing of a massasauga rattlesnake.

park wardens.

Even though the snake is included with other threatened species Canadians hold dear — like the polar bear, peregrine falcon and grizzly bear — McIntyre said people still have a deeply ingrained fear of snakes, even though the eastern massasauga rattler is unique to the southern Georgian Bay area.

"Some species have a cute, cuddly nature that people are proud of," said McIntyre. "This is like that in the Midland area. Even though it's a venomous snake, it's closely tied to the area."

"For that reason, I would hope the community is interested in protecting it, because it isn't found anywhere else.... Unfortunately, you can't pick your threatened species."

McIntyre estimates there are about

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300 eastern massasauga rattlesnakes living in Georgian Bay Islands National Park. If half of those are female and about 90 per cent of their offspring don't survive their first winter, any killing of a productive adult female has a great impact, he said.

Plus, the remaining 10 per cent are subject to other predators, meaning overall mortality rates are high.

"Each (death) chips away at the number of viable ones that can produce young," said McIntyre. "It's a blow to the population, which is still under pressure."

Even without human intervention, McIntyre said there is a low rate of survival among massasaugas in the winter, further depleting their numbers.

In this case, the snake was a healthy adult female that was about 24 inches long and actively reproductive, he said. Adult massasaugas range in size from about 18 to 24 inches.

"It's a timid snake," said McIntyre, noting the species is only aggressive when pursued. "They will strike if they feel threatened or if they are stepped on."

The accused will appear in Midland court on Sept. 16 to answer to the charge. If convicted, the maximum fine is \$250,000 and five years imprisonment.

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