

Georgian Bay rattlers biting more often

Timid, threatened species may be on the rise, expert says

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Georgian Bay area residents and cottagers are being urged to take extra care when outdoors after six people were bitten this summer by potentially deadly rattlesnakes.

Normally only one or two people are bitten each summer by the brown and gray Massasauga rattlesnake, the only poisonous snake in Ontario. It grows up to a metre long.

"As bites are up, obviously people should take care," said John Birnbaum, executive director of the Georgian Bay Association, an umbrella organization that represents 4,500 families.

Kent Prior, a species-at-risk adviser at Environment Canada, said there are two possible reasons for the increase in bites: Either the snakes are more active this summer, given the hot and dry weather, or there's been a jump in the reptile's population.

"My sense is that it's probably a combination of (those reasons)," Prior said.

There are four habitat areas for the Massasauga, considered a threatened species in Ontario. The small and slow-moving snake, known to spend most of its life alone and in hiding, can be found in two large areas around Georgian Bay, as well as in Windsor and Port Colborne.

Its population, estimated to be somewhere in the thousands, has suffered a steady decline and is believed to have decreased by about 60 per cent within the last decade.

The main contributor to this drop, Prior said, is increased development

and depletion of the type of rocky, open areas and wetlands the snake likes to live in during the summer and hibernation months respectively.

Although bites may be up this summer, Prior said it's unusual for the snake to show aggression, as it's known for being quite timid.

"They're not aggressive and not typically dangerous to human health and safety," he said.

If anyone encounters a Massasauga, the snake will use its defence mechanism of rattling to warn potential predators to keep away.

"You should never pick it up or disturb it or molest it," Prior warns. "They're venomous. So in the same

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way you are with a beehive, you wouldn't dink around with it with a stick."

If anyone is bitten, Prior suggests seeking immediate medical attention, even though venom is discharged in only about 60 per cent of rattlesnake bites. All hospitals near the snake's habitats carry antivenin, he said.

Norm Miller, MPP for Parry Sound-Muskoka, said the area is trying to increase its stockpile of the serum to deal with any increase in snakebites.

"I'm not that familiar with snakes myself," he said, "but I think it's fairly natural to be a little nervous."

Otherwise, anyone who crosses paths with the Massasauga is encouraged to enjoy the experience at a safe distance and appreciate the reptile's beauty.

"It's a great thing to see one, because it means there's something good about the habitat," Prior said. "They like ecologically healthy areas."