

Off we go to the Wainfleet Bog to look for rattlesnakes

Some people hate snakes — but everything has its place in our ecology

Wainfleet Bog is not a very inspiring name, but as conservation areas go, it does contain some very interesting wildlife. Much to my family's amazement, that's where I chose to spend my Sundays during May, searching for Massasauga rattlesnakes.

As a relatively recent immigrant to Canada, I am always keen to find out more about my adopted country. I love the great outdoors, and fortunately, we have plenty of that in our wonderful country. So when I read an article about a local search to count rattlesnakes, I was intrigued.

First, I had no idea that rattlesnakes lived so close to home. I had always pictured them rattling away in a distant, parched, desert somewhere in Arizona.

Second, I didn't know they were a threatened species. Of course, a lot of snake haters would think that they should be left to become extinct, and the sooner the better.

But everything has a place in life; each species having its own small link in the ecological chain, even things we

find repulsive or dangerous.

Finally, the article I read mentioned fitting transmitters to the snakes, so that their habitat and hibernation patterns could be tracked and protected.

That was the clincher for me. How on earth do you attach a transmitter to a snake? It can't wear a collar; it would wriggle off. Something attached to its skin would be shed during casting time. So how did you do it? I had to find out.

I persuaded my son to come with me (encouraged by the lure of free pizza afterwards!) and Mother's Day found us huddled against a cool wall in the parking lot of Wainfleet Bog Conservation area.

Dressed in long pants, long-sleeved jackets and various varieties of rubber boots and waders, our small group of volunteers set off into the bush.

Our intrepid leaders were Kim Folich, from the Niagara Conservation Authority, and Rob "the snake man" Tervo, from the Ministry of Natural Resources.

During our hike to the scheduled search area, we learned that this was

one of the few locations in southern Ontario where the snakes remain.

They are 50 to 70 cm (20 to 30 inches) long and chubby, with a small rattle on their tail. During May, they are quite dark, with mottled brown and white markings, but they become lighter in colour in July, when they shed their skins.

Their camouflage is excellent and they depend on it, keeping still when they are approached and only using their rattles when threatened. Consequently, they are very hard to find. Their venom is poisonous, but anti-venom is available at hospitals in areas where the snakes are known to exist.

To search the bush, we spread out in a horizontal line, always keeping a neighbour in sight. We selected "snake-sticks" from fallen branches with which to tap bushes and sweep back the vegetation.

The land is swampy and scrubby, with large clumps of sphagnum moss, blueberry bushes and other types of bushes and trees.

In some places the bush is impenetrable and you have to fight your way around it. We saw garter snakes and

common green snakes (which aren't very common!), but no rattlesnakes.

"Over here! I've found one!" Excitedly, we made our way to that area and watched from a safe distance while Rob and Kim carried the snake to the snake box with long-handled snake hooks. It was a rattler, all right.

I will never forget the sound. It was a female, Rob guessed, and probably pregnant. Quite appropriate for Mother's Day, I thought. The volunteer who found her named her "Agnes."

Soon, Agnes was safely in her box, where she continued to rattle at us, and who could blame her?

Later, she would be taken to the Metro Toronto zoo, where an ultrasound would be performed to determine if she was pregnant. Then she would have a small transmitter implanted under her belly skin.

We were assured that this is not harmful to the snake. Afterwards, she would be released back into the wild, exactly where we had found her.

We searched for another two hours, but couldn't find any more rattlesnakes. My son found some wood frogs and a yellow spotted turtle, which he named "At least we found something!"

He also tried the art of "boot fishing," the object of which appeared to be filling his boots with swamp water, then emptying them while carefully looking for tadpoles.

It was fun, but inefficient. Later, back at the parking lot with dry shoes and socks, we enjoyed some well-deserved pizza. It seemed a shame that Agnes couldn't share the pizza, after all, she was the star of the day.

Wainfleet Bog Day occurs at the end of July, so if you're passing, why not stop and learn some interesting facts about this unspoiled area?

You may even see Agnes, beeping away on the transmitter screen, blissfully unaware that we are watching her every move.

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