

Sitting with snakes

Not far from where I grew up was a place called Rattlesnake Point. Even though no one in recent or distant memory had ever seen a rattlesnake there, I always felt a little jolt of fear and fascination every time we drove by the huge rock escarpment that the rattlers were purported to inhabit.

My attitudes towards rattlesnakes were entirely formed by movies and television. Rattlers were mean snakes, out to bite you if only they got the chance.

The possibility of encountering a rattlesnake, a mean one, underlay all my early snake encounters. Yet I still managed to maintain a fairly comfortable attitude towards the rattler's venomless cousins. I was used to seeing lots of snakes around our farm. At the cottage, the head of a water snake could often be seen bobbing not too far from where we were swimming.

My treatment of them may have even become a little cavalier. When a neighbour was frightened by a garter snake that was hanging out by her dock, I offered to relocate it and ended up with a bite out of my knuckle. Fortunately, that experience left no physical or emotional scars.

It's been years since I've been to Rattlesnake Point, but I probably still carried a hint of my past views about rattlesnakes when I visited Killbear Provincial Park last weekend with the Muskoka Field Naturalists.

Led by snake biologist Chris Parent, the group set out to spot some rattlers and spot some we did. We almost stepped on several snakes and rather than hiss and leap at us, they all pulled the "if I don't move, they won't see me" routine.

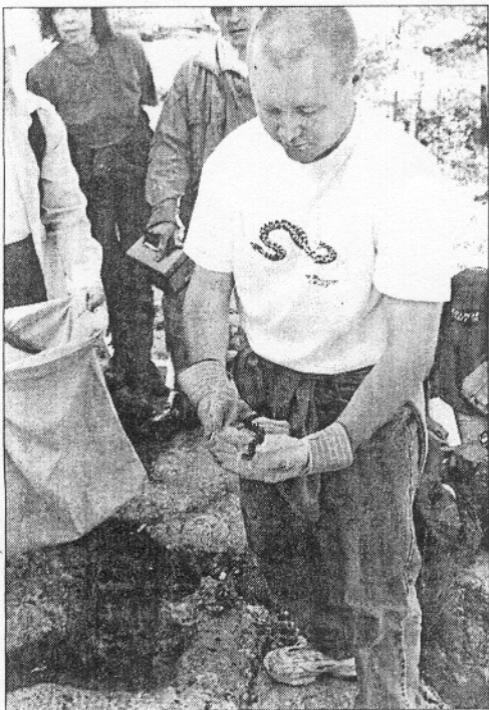
Parent managed to capture four rattlers so he could weigh and measure them for research he's doing that could help preserve the snake population.

And that's how I found myself with a box of rattlesnakes on my lap as we drove back from our excursion. Each snake was enclosed in a pillowcase. Three were in the box and one sat on top to prevent overcrowding.

I stared at the grey and white striped pillowcase in front of me, following the movements of the snake's head as it searched inside for a way out. The snake was certainly miffed—its rattle buzzed furiously.

Here was a creature endangered in parts of the United States, and on its way to being so here. It wants nothing more than to be left alone. It doesn't deserve our fear, but rather our respect and consideration.

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BABY SNAKE. Biologist Chris Parent captures a young rattlesnake in Killbear Provincial Park during an outing with the Muskoka Field Naturalists.