

The rattlesnakes of Killbear Provincial Park

By **MARTHA ARMSTRONG**

"This is perfect snake-catching weather," announces Chris Parent to about 30 members of the Muskoka Field Naturalists. The partly sunny, partly cloudy weather, explains Killbear Provincial Park's snake biologist, is ideal for spotting the eastern massasauga rattlesnake.

A few nervous looks are exchanged, but most of the group is excited about this weekend excursion near Parry Sound to view the habitat of the elusive rattlesnake.

Half the group heads out in the park with Parent to look for snakes; the rest of the group will go later in the day. Snakes can't hear, but the vibrations of too many feet will send them slithering away.

Parent hands out snake sticks to members of the group. The long metal poles with hooked ends are ideal for parting vegetation as well as for scooping up a snake. Parent, however, stresses that he will be the only one catching snakes today.

Parent is just completing a master's degree in biology at Carleton University and has been studying the rattlesnakes at Killbear since 1994.

"This species really is going extinct right before our eyes," says Parent. The massasauga rattler is found in parts of Ontario and nine

American states. It is considered endangered in the United States and in Canada it is listed as threatened, one step away from endangered.

Loss of habitat, primarily through urbanization, is the main reason for the shrinking population. Poachers are also a growing problem.

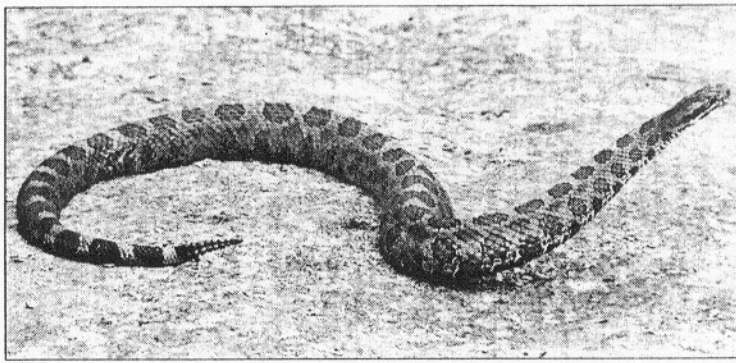
"The eastern shore of Georgian Bay is the last best place to find the snakes," explains Parent. In Muskoka, the rattlers have been seen as far east as Bala.

Parent says the research on the park's snakes will help scientists understand how the species survives and perhaps offer insights on how to preserve the population.

So far this year, Parent has personally handled about 230 snakes. When he or his colleagues catch one, they take the snake to the lab, where it is tagged, weighed and measured. When the same snakes are caught in the future, Parent can identify them and use this information to chart growth and longevity patterns.

He also takes blood samples and uses DNA to establish paternity and also to identify genetic differences between this snake population and others.

As the Field Naturalists move slowly through the woods, poking bushes with their snake sticks, Parent explains that the reptiles are easy to miss.



FREE AT LAST. This male rattlesnake takes a minute to adjust to his surroundings after being released from a pillow case. The Muskoka Field Naturalists named him MFN, pronounced "Muffin."

Photo by Martha Armstrong

"If I had a dime for every time someone walked a snake-stick-length from a rattler, I could pay for my own research," he says.

When the group reaches an area the snakes are known to frequent, Parent suggests people fan out. "Just yell if you find one," he says.

"You bet we will," someone responds quickly.

With Parent along, the group is guaranteed to see a snake. That's because three of the park's snakes have been fitted with radio transmitters, enabling Parent to track and study them.

Parent assembles an antenna and receiver, and in mere minutes the blips emitted by the receiver have led him to Buttercup, who is coiled and barely visible beneath a pine tree.

Well camouflaged by her brown and black markings,

Buttercup doesn't move a millimetre while the group crowds around to catch a glimpse.

Parent points out that Buttercup hardly typifies the image of the rattlesnake depicted by Hollywood.

"It's just a shy little animal that really doesn't want anything to do with people," he says.

The group moves on until Parent finds a place to release a snake he has caught the night before. The Muskoka Field Naturalists have given it their initials, MFN, to be pronounced Muffin.

Once MFN has been let out of his pillow case, he sits on the rock for several minutes, allowing group members to get some pictures. Having had enough attention, he eventually slides away like mercury, emitting an annoyed rattle in the process. The sound could easily be mistaken for a forest insect.

Even the more nervous members of the group are impressed by these encounters. And for Gil Hunter of Gravenhurst, who has a special interest in reptiles and amphibians, this trip is a real treat.

"So many people—they hate snakes and they can't really tell you why," he says. But they're not so scary, "once you get to study their point of view on life."

After tracking down Al, another transmitter-implanted snake and the father of Buttercup's babies, Parent takes the group to

hears a rattle. "Don't move," he calls out to Barbara Coates of Milford Bay. Parent has spotted two snakes by her feet.

In the ensuing excitement, Parent manages to scoop each snake into its own pillow case while Coates escapes unscathed.

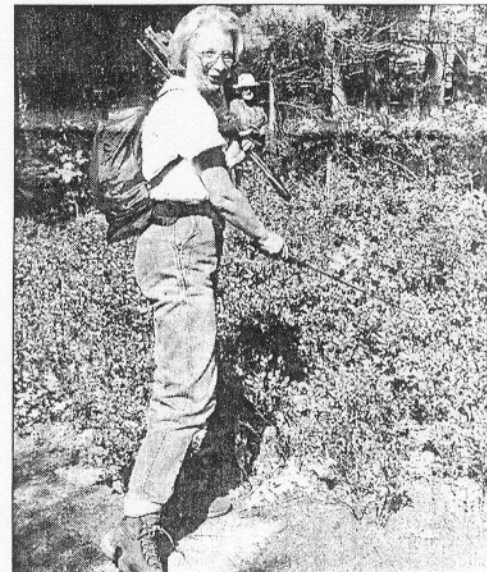
"After nine years I still get an adrenaline rush," says Parent as he knots the sack. Snake bites are rare at Killbear. In fact, no park visitor has ever been bitten while Parent has worked there. Still, he doesn't take any chances.

The group packs up and gets ready to return to the staff house when Dinny Nimmo of Bala calls out, "Oh, there's a big one."

A large rattler is making its way across the rocks, but not before Parent has snagged it and placed it in the last pillow case.

With four snakes to study, Parent pronounces the morning a success. The extra eyes and ears of the Field Naturalists, he says, have helped increase his data of Killbear's snake population.

"They've actively contributed to the research," says Parent.



DINNY NIMMO of Bala searches for rattlers using a snake stick to part the bushes.

Photo by Martha Armstrong



TRACKING BUTTERCUP. Several snakes are implanted with transmitters, which enable researchers to locate the reptiles using a receiver and antenna.

Photo by Martha Armstrong

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