

The bite report

Snakes doing fine:
people are the
problem

The first week of August 1997 was one the staff at the West Parry Sound Health Centre won't soon forget. Among a host of other accidents, four people were bitten by venomous Eastern Massasauga rattlesnakes, requiring OPP officers from four detachments to relay additional antivenin serum from hospitals in Midland, Sudbury, North Bay, Bracebridge, and Scarborough.

Is this a sign that the massasauga rattlesnake population is on the increase? Bob Johnson, curator of reptiles and amphibians at the Toronto Zoo, doesn't think so. The only thing unusual about last summer, he says, is that a season's worth of bites all happened in one week. And that may have had more to do with long-weekend high-jinks than unusual aggression on the part of the rattlers. As is often the case, according to nursing supervisor Lorraine Vankoughnett, "alcohol was involved in a large percentage of the bites. One person was trying to handle the snake and he was bitten twice on the hand."

Listed as a threatened species, the massasauga has only four isolated populations left in the province. Two of the major refuges are on the eastern shores of Georgian Bay and parts of the Bruce Peninsula. Habitat loss to development is still a concern, but "we're winning the battle" when it comes to public education, says Johnson, who has taught hundreds of cottagers about living in rattlesnake country. "Cottagers and campers are learning that these are extremely shy creatures that are better left alone."

In fact, the massasauga rattlesnake prefers to be left alone. When herpetologist Chris Parent outfitted 34 rattlers in Parry Sound's Killbear Provincial Park with radio transmitters, he discovered that dozens of park visitors unknowingly walked as close as a metre to hiding rattlers without incident.

"The snakes go out of their way to avoid confrontation," says Parent, pointing out that just one visitor has been bitten in the 37 years since Killbear opened in 1960.

Bob Johnson will conduct two free, four-hour rattlesnake seminars at the Toronto Zoo in late April or May and in November. For more information, e-mail bjohnson@zoo.metrotor.on.ca; fax (416) 392-4979; or write Bob Johnson, Toronto Zoo, 361-A Old Finch Ave., Scarborough, ON M1B 5K7. —*Stephen Leahy*



HOW TO AVOID GETTING RATTLED BY RATTLEERS

- Watch where you put your hands and feet and use a flashlight at night.
- Teach kids to identify the snake and its rattle, move away from the sound, and never pick one up.
- If you encounter a rattlesnake, don't panic. Chances are it will disappear in a few hours.
- If you must move a rattlesnake, use a broom or other long-handled tool to carefully sweep it into a large garbage can turned on its side. Put the lid on and take the snake to a secluded part of your property less than a half-kilometre from where you found it.

DO'S AND DON'TS OF RATTLESNAKE BITES

- Do keep the victim calm and immobile.
- Do wash the wound with soap and water and get to the hospital.
- Don't attempt to suck the venom from the wound or use ice or tourniquets or even kits sold for rattlesnake bites, which can cause more damage to the tissue around the wound.

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