

# Rattlesnakes: Part One

*In light of the sensationalism the Toronto Sun attached to the recent rattlesnake bite incident in this region, Sounding Line thought it was appropriate to speak to Chris Parent who has spent the last few years doing research on Massasauga Rattlers in Killbear Park. Chris is an acknowledged expert on them, one of a very few scientists who have actually done research on them. The conversation was conducted without benefit of tape recorder, so while it is not verbatim, it has been accurately reconstituted from notes.*

**SL:** Let's deal with everybody's question first. How often do people get bitten and how dangerous is it?

**CP:** I think what is more interesting is how many people don't get bitten. It's amazing how often people walk within five feet of a snake and don't even know it's there. I've implanted 31 snakes with radio transmitters and have been tracking them for two and one half years, some of them on trails, campsites, under trucks and so on.

To a snake we are a large predator. Their first line of defence is camouflage. They freeze. You can be as close as within two feet and nine out of ten will not make a response. They're next line of defence is to rattle. Most will rattle as they're crawling away. We've tested this by putting them on the ground and trying it with them. Usually they spin away and go the other direction. Their very last response is to strike.

In a bad year, there might be a half dozen biting incidents, usually there are two or three. Nobody knows for sure because there is no central agency tracking them.

There are a few things we do know. Snakes have individual characteristics and some will strike where others wouldn't. Also, they are really sensitive to temperature. On a cool or cold day they are more likely to rely on their camouflage than on a warm day when they're feeling livelier.

**SL:** How dangerous is a bite?

**CP:** Well, it is a serious medical emergency, if bitten get to a hospital as quickly as possible. (*Chris asked us to emphasize that he is not a doctor, so his opinion is only that of an informed amateur.*) My impression is that a bite from even the largest Massasauga Rattler would take 24 hours to kill you. The sooner you get to the hospital the better.

There are reasons that a Massasauga Rattler bite isn't as dangerous as other rattlesnakes. They are relatively small (*two and a half feet is big*) compared to say an Eastern Diamondback Rattler, which often reach six feet, so the amount of venom injected is proportionately smaller. There is also evidence to suggest that they can control the amount of venom they inject. (In lab experiments it has been shown that other rattlers will inject more venom into a larger animal than a small.) There is reason to suspect they may just bite people to scare them off and not use a whole lot of venom. It needs more research.

**SL:** I overheard somebody the other day saying that the bite of a hungry rattler was more venomous than a well fed rattler...

**CP:** There is no evidence that supports that. Another very persistent myth is that the bite of a smaller snake is worse than the bite of a bigger snake. It's true that in some desert varieties of rattlesnake the venom changes as the snake gets bigger because what they hunt changes. We don't have any evidence to show whether that is true for Massasauga Rattlers or not, but I still think that the size of the snake is more important.

**SL:** I went blueberry picking the other day, on a rocky island. I was wearing shorts and sandals. We were in juniper bushes, perfect snake country. I had a stick and I was rattling the bushes in front of me before I stepped into them. Was I doing the right thing?

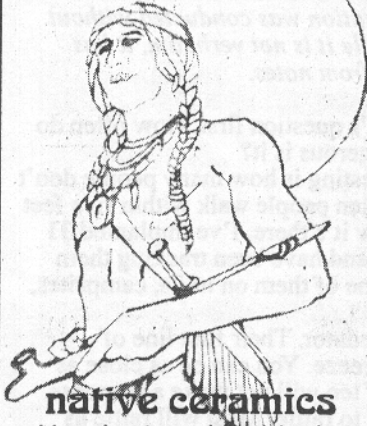
**CP:** Well, the stick and the noise were a good idea. But,

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## Rattlesnakes Continued...

Unfortunately, the snake's first line of defence is camouflage, so any snake in the bush would freeze when you rattled the bushes.

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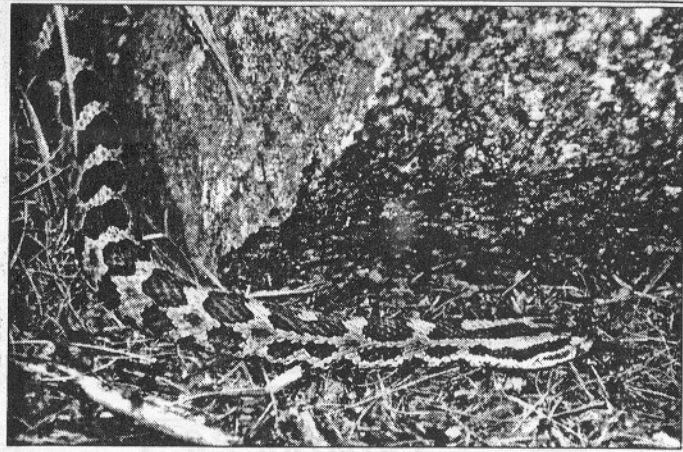
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Then when you step in... Shoes and thick jeans would be a better idea.

SL: Oh. Ok. Let's talk about the snakes for a while. They're an endangered species. Is that because the snakes are being hit too hard by people or because their habitat is shrinking?

CP: It's a combination of both. There's been a tremendous loss of habitat, particularly wetlands. These snakes used to be all over southern Ontario and the northern states. All of that has been lost to agriculture and development. And the fragmentation of snake populations is hard on them. The habitat gets broken up into isolated pockets. Then if anything goes wrong in one of the pockets, say a disease, and the population is weakened and then gets hit by a bad winter, they're gone. And even if the habitat is there, there are no snakes able to colonize it. If you think of it as a series of red lights representing the snake habitat and the lights going out one by one... There was a study done over 10 years in Pennsylvania. There were ten areas with snakes living in them but they were pockets with no connection between them. Ten years later only four of them still had snakes. They can't be repopulated if the snakes can't get to them. That's what's happened in southern Ontario and the states. It has to be said that the Eastern shore of Georgian Bay is the last best place, the largest continuous expanse of habitat still existing for the Massasauga Rattler.



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Let's go back to snake bites for a bit. I want to differentiate between a legitimate bite and an illegitimate bite. A legitimate bite is a bite where it happens purely by accident, if you step over a rock, for instance, and step on a snake. An illegitimate bite is where a person puts himself in harm's way more or less knowing what they are doing. An example of a legitimate bite... a woman went out of her cottage with some other people at night. She was fourth in line, they were on rocky terrain with juniper cover, good rattlesnake habitat. She was bitten on the toe. She must just have gotten too close. There is a risk in country like this, but you can lessen it by simple measures like wearing shoes.

An example of an illegitimate bite... I was out doing habitat measurement and the snake we were tracking had moved off. But there was another one right near it. Rob sat down to make some notes, and looked up over his notebook to see a snake right beside him. It had all the opportunity to strike him but didn't, it crawled away. I went to catch it using one of our snake sticks. I pinned it but it was in some bushes, so I couldn't lift it up. I reached in to grab it behind the head, it got loose and it bit me. My fault.

There have only been two recorded instances of death from a Massasauga Rattlesnake bite and they were over thirty years ago and they didn't get to a hospital. Repeated stories make out the likelihood of getting bitten to be worse than it really is.

*Next issue Part II: (Let's turn the sssensationalism around,)*

*- The little girl who dumped her Barbie to help with snake ressearch!!!*

*- The campers who protected a sssnake from an axe wielding wannabe snakekiller!!!*

*- What do snake researchers really do with these snakes?*

*- How do male snakes track down female snakes? A possible solution to the mystery of the five snake campsite!!!*

*Don't miss the ssscintillating conclusion to our rattlesnake interview, SSSeptember 19. SSSee you then....*