

Family's Bruce Peninsula property is home to rattlesnakes

By ELIZABETH SHEARER
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

When Joyce MacKenzie-Hirasawa and Jack Hirasawa purchased their Bruce Peninsula property in 1996, they didn't count on sharing their abode with a well-established community of residents of the slithering kind — snakes, that is.

And the big daddy of the various species that inhabit the place is the venomous Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake.

"On any given day we might see several," says MacKenzie-Hirasawa. "We might see one full-grown rattler somewhere along a surveyor's cut, another in an open clearing. We might see one down by the water or slithering out from under the cabin. We've had them sunning on the driveway.

"Once my husband accidentally stepped on one as he was approaching the cabin carrying a load of wood."

As parents of two young boys, Toshio, 7, and Takeo, 6, and owners of a very curious golden retriever, the Hirasawas eagerly sought information on the snake from the Internet, provincial park pamphlets and the Metro Toronto Zoo.

"It's constantly on our minds because we have small children and we have a dog. The kids are interested in frogs and as you move toward the waterfront, the marshy area has an abundance of frogs for the snakes to feed on. I call it the lurch bar," says MacKenzie-Hirasawa.

"I ease off if we're sitting down or we're having a meal, or if there's a



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SNAKE SAVVY: Bruce Peninsula cottagers Joyce MacKenzie-Hirasawa and Jack Hirasawa have taught their children Toshio, left, and Takeo how to identify the rattlesnake, be attentive to sounds and simply to move away when they see one.

lot of activity. My gut instinct is that they won't chase you and they won't creep up on you."

In Ontario, rattlesnake encounters occur frequently during the summer months. Populations of Massasauga rattlesnakes live in Windsor, Port Colborne, and the Georgian Bay regions.

The Metro Toronto Zoo has created bi-annual rattlesnake workshops in response to the increasing number of distress calls it receives from people who are needlessly terrified of them.

The snakes often end up getting their heads cut off. (As a protected endangered species, you are subject to a fine if you harm a rattlesnake).

"We help people to actually keep them on their property and move them, so that killing snakes is no longer part of the equation," says Bob Johnson, the zoo's curator of reptiles and amphibians.

Animal activists maintain the reputation of the rattlesnake is larger than life. It is actually a passive creature that will avoid human contact if simply left alone.

The Hirasawas' experience confirms this. "Our encounters have usually been us coming across them, especially if we're out hiking," says MacKenzie-Hirasawa.

"We've been relying more and more on the non-confrontational nature of the snake — it's not aggressive. We've seen that many times. When Jack stepped on one, he did not get bitten. I've also seen our dog (standing) right over a rattler, sniffing it, but the rattler froze and he didn't get bitten."

The only time the Hirasawas have seen a rattlesnake in attack mode was the time they removed one that

was basking less than 60 centimetres from their kids on the sandpile.

"It had to be removed, no question," says MacKenzie-Hirasawa. "We picked it up with the tip of a walking stick. It tried to get off and when we picked it up again, it struck. That was the real angry rattler."

Like other forms of wildlife, noise is a deterrent and will keep the snakes away. It is only when stumbled upon that there is a potential danger. Even then, the rattlesnake will issue its famous rattle warning sound and, if left alone, will not attack.

After several summers at the cottage, the Hirasawas now take life among the rattlesnakes in stride. But they admit the situation can be unnerving for some visitors. "Some people have refused to move from the cabin and will not go on a hike at all."

They have taught their kids to identify the rattlesnake, be attentive to sounds and simply to move away when they see one. "They have absolutely no fear of snakes," says MacKenzie-Hirasawa.

When a research team from Killbear Provincial Park accepted an invitation to use the property for field work, five different species of snakes were bagged in the course of two hours. Two of the snakes were

rattlers. The tails of all the snakes were painted bright orange, so now at least two rattlers are identifiable.

"We watch out for them and spot them now and again," says MacKenzie-Hirasawa. "Toshio named one Rex. He's fat, he's huge, so we assume he is well fed."

The Hirasawas take pride in the fact they have chosen to learn about their environment and co-exist with elements of nature that existed in their domain long before them.

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