

Rattlesnake Roundup; RATTLER REPORT

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"The scales protect a soft creamy belly, cool to the touch. The snakes feel remarkably clean and powerful. Like one long rippling muscle . . . you can run your thumb along the belly and feel, like jelly beans, the litter within. One female carries 13 young, plus what feels like the skull of a rodent."

I'm standing on the bald prairie holding a bag of hostile rattlesnakes, looking for a spot of shade.

Who'd have thought a rattlesnake can get sunstroke?

It's been a wildly successful day on this rattler roundup, the first of its kind in Western Canada. My companions were having so much luck hauling snakes out of the hill behind me, this first bunch had been kept waiting a little too long.

Andy Didiuk, the wildlife biologist in charge, had asked for help.

Clutching the bag by its draw-string, arm extended, I set out for a little thicket of deadwood and chokecherry bush a dozen metres away. Anything for God, country and reptiles.

There was still some muffled rattling behind the canvas cloth but most of them had fallen silent. Five of them, rolling and twisting inside, intertwining into a malevolent ball.

One of them was at least 1.5 metres long and as big around as three of his buddies combined. If I stood him up on his tail he'd reach about to my throat.

I tucked the bag behind some sheltering branches. "That's a favor you owe me, boys."

We were on a hillside overlooking an old oxbow of the South Saskatchewan River, 20 km north of Medicine Hat and just inside the southeastern perimeter of the massive Suffield military block. To the north lay the windblown dunes of the Middle Sand Hills, to the west an abandoned rifle range.

Closer to hand the terrain was parched grassland, sagebrush and prickly pear cactus. Pastureland pocked by old badger holes and coyote dens -- perfect quarters for the prairie rattlesnake.

The Suffield military range covers 2,400 square kilometres, a huge chunk of

off-limits territory that's used primarily for training armored units of the Canadian and British armies.

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The rattler that ranges southern Alberta and southwestern Saskatchewan is one of the more retiring members of the North American rattlesnake clan. Living memory fails to turn up a single snake-bite fatality in Western Canada. But it's been close a few times.

Two years ago a nine-year-old Calgary girl was bitten twice by an adult rattlesnake at Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park. By the time she reached Lethbridge hospital she was in terrible pain, twitching and vomiting, and her leg was turning black. She spent days in intensive care, where she was given 31 bottles of anti-venom serum. She recovered.

I was thinking about that little girl as I watched Didiuk pull another snake, maybe a metre long, from its siesta spot at the edge of a hole up the hill. A mottled brown, shading to green, it sported rows of dark-bordered blotches running back from the head, becoming bands toward the tail.

The rattle, shaking like a crazed castanet, was blackened at the base. A big one with nine interlocking segments.

One second Didiuk had it, the next it slipped free from the steel jaws and twisted to the ground between us.

Instantly, it whipped into a coil, its tail aloft and rattling furiously. The diamond-shaped head rose from the coils, bobbing in the air, ugly black tongue flicking, looking to strike.

"Boy, he's really cranked up," grinned Sharp, struggling to hold yet another snake as it rolled and snapped at the pole restraining it. All the while a young rattler played dead behind me and my companion, photographer Larry Wong. Coiled immobile, head and tail tucked in, it was almost easy to overlook. Almost.

The dry prairie air buzzed with a remarkable chorus of rattles, like the zing of fishing line whipping off a reel.

The brass mesh leggings strapped atop our boots no longer seemed such an absurd precaution. Nor did the stick I gripped in my hand.

Didiuk had handed it to me when we left the trucks at the top of the ridge

to set out into the valley on foot. A long Fiberglas rod with tape wrapped around one end for a handle. Sweep the ground ahead as you walk, he advised, and you'll be less likely to come upon a snake unawares.

Didiuk, 43, and Sharp, 26, are trying to get a fix on five species of snake, including the elusive hog-nosed snake, bull snake and garter snake.

But today the quarry is rattler.

"The first thing to remember with a rattlesnake is they don't always rattle," Didiuk said as we set out.

"It comes down to either walking heavy or walking light," added Sharp. "Walk heavy and they know you're coming. Walk light and sometimes they don't rattle."

Suddenly, Didiuk lurched the truck to a stop, excited. A Tiger salamander on the road. I held the thing while he got log book and ruler. Walking the treadmill of my pains the salamander had a cold rubbery feel and a set of alien button eyes. But it was still only a salamander.

Thirty minutes later, as the four of us fanned out across the prairie, it occurred to me that salamander might be the only catch of the day.

But then Wong, a few paces ahead, stopped short and peered into a yellowed patch of grass near his feet. "Unhh . . .," he said uncertainly, then quickly stepped back.

The sound was barely audible but distinctive. Like dry rice shaken in a tin cup.

The snake slipped back into an old gopher hole before Didiuk could take more than a few strides our way. But with a quick pirouette he stabbed his pole at the ground and pulled up another, hissing in protest.

Within a few minutes there were four snakes in the sack and Didiuk and Sharp were bent over a fifth, stretched along a measuring stick laid on the ground.

The snakes are handled one at a time, each first restrained with a noose stick. The padded noose is slipped just past the head, then pulled tight.

It's only then that you can safely examine the reptile up close. Slit eyes, hooded by scales. Two small heat-sensitive pits near the nostrils with which it detects most of its warm-blooded prey. A gaping fleshy pink mouth framed by two saber fangs, curving down and inwards.

The armor plate of the scales protect a soft creamy belly, cool to the touch when they're fresh from the den. The sweat rolls off us from the heat and the unflagging tension. The snakes feel remarkably clean and powerful. Like one long rippling muscle.

Methodically, Didiuk and Sharp log the length, weight and color of each snake, as well as the sex -- determined by a little gentle probing at the anal plate near the tail. Male snakes have a dual penis; Andy can't really say why.

Each is then marked for tracking purposes. Two of the scales, left and right, that run in rows along the tail are snipped away with small scissors. Each snake is clipped in a different order and the order carefully noted in the book, so each is clearly identifiable should it be recaptured.

One by one, the snakes are returned to their dens.

The two biologists work slowly, taking particular care with the smaller snakes whose heads don't always fit the noose stick.

"If it gets out of the noose when you're sitting there sexing it and clipping scales it's not going to get you on the toe," Didink said. "It's going to get you in the throat or eye. Then you're in real trouble."

We walked out of the valley an hour later, leaving behind a hill crawling with angry snakes. Seventeen rattlers captured, marked and released in four hours.

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* The rattle consists of loosely interlocking horny segments that produce a buzzing noise when the snake is alarmed. Although a new rattle is added each time the snake sheds its skin, the rattles break off and do not indicate age.

* Only about a sixth of North America's 115 species of snake are venomous, including all 13 members of the rattlesnake family. The diamondback rattlesnake native to the southeastern U.S. is among the heaviest of the world's poisonous snakes. The largest on record weighed 15 kg and stretched 2.3 metres.

* The fanged one is not an endangered species although it did, more or less by accident, wind up on the protected list when the Alberta Wildlife Act was overhauled in 1981. The ban on killing the snake was removed in 1987.

* Rattlesnake season begins in early to mid-April as the ground begins to thaw. The snakes emerge from hibernation in their dens to sun themselves and raise their body temperature. Rattlesnakes give birth to live young in late summer, usually near the fall den site.

* Rattlesnakes prefer warm-blooded prey like birds, mice and voles. They cannot chew their prey so they must first immobilize and kill their food before dining. They do so by injecting venom through their two hollow fangs in the upper jaw, drawing poison from a pair of glands.

* The rattlesnake's backbone consists of some 200 ball-and-socket joints .

ILLUSTRATION

Edmonton Journal, Larry Wong / Biologist Jason Sharp grapples with a rattlesnake Illustrating a restrained rattlesnake/ 9409081.WON

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