

Newsletter #7
Fall 2004

What's New?

And the Survey Says...

Parks Canada and the Georgian Bay Reptile Awareness Program conducted a phone survey this summer to determine the level of awareness of the eastern massasauga rattlesnake in our area. People were asked general questions about the rattlesnake, how they had learned about the snake and what kind of information they would like to receive in the future. We are still evaluating the results and these will be shared in our spring newsletter. This survey will help guide our future outreach efforts.

Special Thanks to...

Aiden Vowel, a Grade 4 student who volunteered all day at our booth at the Mckellar Fall Fair.

Toronto Zoo and Bluewater Interpreters for the loan of reptiles this summer. The opportunity to see reptiles up close was a highlight for many people.

Bill Fells Photography, Randi Krist (Parry Sound Marina), Harris Lake Tent and Trailer Park, Sundridge Horticultural Society and the Senior League Endowment Society for your donations to the program.

Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources for their support of the program.



The Government of Canada Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk for their contribution. This funding has provided valuable support for hiring our program assistant Mark Wiercinski and other program initiatives.



Friends of Awenda Provincial Park and Awenda Park for providing office space and support to Mark Wiercinski.

Ontario Trillium Foundation for their on-going support of the Georgian Bay Reptile Awareness Program.



THE ONTARIO TRILLIUM FOUNDATION
LA FONDATION TRILLIUM DE L'ONTARIO

And finally, thank you to everyone that hosted a reptile awareness presentation this summer.

Reptile Reporters

As the weather cools down and most reptiles have moved into their hibernation sites there won't be many calls of new sightings. There have been 115 reports submitted this year and a few more may arrive as people take the time to report their sightings from earlier in the year. You can file your reports on line at ww.gbayreptiles.com, by mail or by calling toll free 1-866-277-6577.



or Email?

If you would prefer to receive your newsletter via email, please send your email address to reptiles@vianet.ca. This option helps reduce our use of paper and mailing expenses.

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Notes From the Field

Research Around the Bay

Killbear Provincial Park

Anna Lawson began the research season early this year. Seven hibernation sites were monitored during emergence. A site with two transmitter-equipped snakes had been predated during the winter. A transmitter with teeth marks was all that was found of one snake and the other did not emerge. Two live foxsnakes were found at the site compared to 38 in 2003.

Fifteen foxsnakes were tracked this year. Many of the snakes moved long distances, including a 4.5 kms trek over land and water in less than 24 hours. Four foxsnakes did not survive these journeys: cars killed two, one was predated and the cause of death is still to be determined for the fourth. One snake also went missing likely as a result of transmitter failure.

Residents of the Bay are familiar with seeing foxsnakes in trees searching for prey. Anna also observed a pair in a tree but they weren't chasing food. The pair mated about 10m from the ground in the branches of a pine tree. The researchers had a number of opportunities to observe males fighting over females and mating pairs.

Anna's crew also observed 5 egg laying sites. Four sites were used by more than one foxsnake and 10 females used one site! The females moved between sites before they chose where to lay their eggs. In late summer, there was evidence of hatching at 3 of the sites.

Anna will return to the study site in the spring to study the emergence from hibernation. She will then

retreat to finish writing her Master's thesis. Her efforts have helped us better understand the habits of foxsnakes in this area and the threats to their survival.

Georgian Bay Islands National Park

The eastern foxsnake research project, initiated as a partnership between Parks Canada and the University of Guelph in 2003 is coming to a close. Another successful field research season has wound down as foxsnakes have moved to their hibernation sites.

Foxsnakes were found to travel further and more frequently than expected at the start of the study. Some individuals have moved 20 kilometres this season. All foxsnakes tracked in the Honey Harbour area swam on multiple occasions throughout the active season, occasionally swimming up to 2.5 kilometres in one day. The first swim for both years occurred in the second week of May, when the water temperature was a chilly 10°C.

A cursory look at the data indicates that most foxsnakes will follow a very similar travel route in consecutive years. However a few individuals, in this study, have shown considerable year-to-year differences in travel route.

Foxsnakes exhibit a very active mating season in June. Both males and females may mate with multiple partners, whereas some couples stay together for a week or more. Males will scent-track females, sometimes following her trail for several days. We observed several females laying their eggs in the same location.

In 2003, 121 foxsnakes were microchipped, and in 2004, 71 foxsnakes were microchipped (a total of 194 in the two year study).

So, what does this mean? Foxsnakes in the Honey Harbour area are co-existing with residents and are successfully breeding, but they still face some serious threats. Their large activity ranges mean that they are likely to encounter road or boat traffic, construction sites or people who dislike snakes at some point during their travels. We hope studies like this will help people understand the foxsnake better and potentially help to reduce some threats to the species. By keeping our shorelines natural, watching for reptiles crossing the road and encouraging your neighbours to be snake-friendly, you can play a big role in protecting this special resident of Georgian Bay.

Carrie MacKinnon/ University of Guelph

Highway 69 Project

We have just passed the first anniversary of the opening of the highway and thousands of vehicles have travelled the new route. The busy highway has made identifying road killed snakes much more challenging from a safety point of view for the researchers and from the fact that there is often not much left to identify. Dead reptiles tended to be less than one metre onto the roadway. Where the five kms of drift fencing was in place only one milksnake was killed. Milksnakes are good climbers so it likely went over the barrier. The drift fences help guide the reptiles to culverts. So far, the culverts don't appear to be an attractive option for reptiles to travel under the highway. The entrances of the culverts were modified this year using rocks and soil to create a ramp effect. Four snakes (garter and milk) travelled through the culverts. Next year, the team plans to add rocks and soil along the length of the culvert.

One of the transmitter-equipped rattlesnakes was found dead on the road less than 10 cm from the side. Rattlesnakes do not seem to hesitate to cross roads. Hog-nosed snakes however seem to be more cautious of roads and will travel along the edge. This behaviour changes during mating season. Then the males throw caution to the wind and travel across roads, often with grim consequences. Love Hurts!

Wasaga Beach Provincial Park

Glenn Cunnington, research coordinator, and his assistant, Phil Wilson, had a successful summer tracking eastern hog-nosed snakes. With the assistance of Matt Lake, junior park naturalist, they tracked a total of nine snakes. The team recorded 33 adult captured snakes this summer and 34 juvenile snakes. This season, soil temperature data loggers were placed in and around the park. The data loggers were installed to gain a better understanding of how ground temperatures may be influencing movement and distribution patterns of the local eastern hog-nosed snake population. Findings from this year's research will be compiled with the last three seasons to aid in stewardship initiatives for this species at risk.

The educational portion of the program continued this year with presentations to over 500 individuals for local school and interest groups. Phil, in cooperation with the Reptile Awareness Program, did a great job of making local schools and summer camps aware of the project and snakes in general.



Bruce Peninsula National Park

Whether the eastern massasauga rattlesnake provokes fear or fascination in you, it seems that more people are learning to live with this special reptile.

This year, over 10,600 people attended rattlesnake education programs hosted by the National Park. With events such as hikes, amphitheatre programs, community workshops, landowner visits, and school programs, people on the Bruce Peninsula are certainly getting the "buzz" on how to co-exist with the rattlesnake. Tom, a rattlesnake borrowed from the Toronto Zoo, has become a celebrity this summer, making appearances at programs and events such as the international Ploughing Match and the Provincial Environthon.

Understanding the rattlesnake is the first step to ensure its survival. The past four years, Dan Harvey from the University of Illinois has been exploring the habitat of the massasauga using radio-tracking equipment to get a glimpse into the day-to-day lives of 34 rattlesnakes. Among his discoveries are that massasaugas are found in diverse areas, generally preferring locations with nearby retreat sites and some ground cover, but with enough exposure to the sun.

Because rattlesnakes are well camouflaged, finding them is a challenge, making it difficult to census their population. This summer, park researchers tried to find new ways of searching for rattlesnakes. At first, shelters were put out for massasaugas, by laying big pieces of sheet metal throughout their habitat. The metal attracted every snake species but the massasauga! However, the second method used was more successful. Researchers found 28 snakes in just over 22 hours by searching areas that pregnant females occupy.

So, whether you feel cold-blooded or not when you hear the word rattlesnake, it appears that most people are warming up to the idea of working together to help the eastern massasauga rattlesnake.

Sean Liipere/ Bruce Peninsula National Park

Threatened Rattlesnake Killed in National Park

Following a month long investigation by the Georgian Bay Islands National Park Warden Service, a 32 year old Simcoe County man was arrested by park wardens and charged with poaching in the national park. The subject will appear in Midland court on September 16th to answer the charge that he killed an Eastern Massasauga rattlesnake, a protected species on Beausoleil Island, near Honey Harbour. The Eastern Massasauga rattlesnake is considered a "threatened" species and is at risk of becoming endangered in Canada. The maximum penalty for killing an Eastern Massasauga rattlesnake in a national park is \$250,000 and/or 5 years in jail.

Georgian Bay Islands National Park encourages the public to help protect national parks by becoming active partners in the detection and reporting of wildlife crime.

If you have information about any national park wildlife poaching crime, please contact Georgian Bay Islands National Park and speak with a park warden.



On the Road

From MacGregor Point to Orillia, Mark Wiercinski covered the southern portion of Georgian Bay. Starting in May, Mark hosted 70 presentations to over 6,500 people, including school visits, cottagers associations, kids camps, interest groups, construction crews and even a military group. In the Collingwood and Wasaga Beach area the programs got a boost from Phil Wilson, the research assistant on the Eastern Hog-nosed Snake project.

Mark also helped in the search efforts for a foxsnake that went missing for a while from the Georgian Bay Islands Research Project. The Eastern Hog-nosed Snake Research got Mark's help with door-to-door visitation.

Tremendous support came from Tim Tully (Bluewater Interpreters.) They donated the use of seven reptiles from their collection. The Friends of Awenda and the staff at Awenda Provincial Park provided office space and support to the program. The outreach staff and Sean Liipere, from Bruce Peninsula National Park, helped with some of the demonstrations and loaned a milksnake for a month of school visits.

Mark's visits to schools and other groups were very well received. His enthusiasm for reptiles encouraged even the less than keen to learn more about these species.



Cold Blooded Love Story

I never thought I'd live to see the day that I felt affection toward a snake. But, that was before I met Jimmy. And Glenda. That's when our bizarre love triangle began.

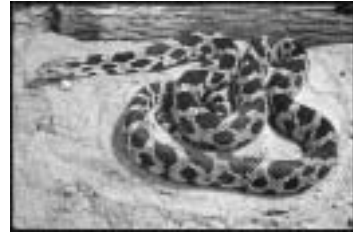
I should probably clarify a few things. Jimmy is a fox snake living in captivity at Killbear. Glenda Clayton is the warm blooded Program Coordinator with the Georgian Bay Reptile Awareness Program. My name is Shannon and I'm a recovering ophidiophobe (snake phobic) working for the Museum On Tower Hill in Parry Sound.

A fear of snakes is not fun. It means high levels of stress during cottage weekends and endless opportunities for friends to freak you out with rubber replicas. I needed to get over it. Glenda helped me do that.

Glenda eased me into recovery in a snake-free environment. She encouraged me to ask questions. I was amazed to find that the more I learned, the more I wanted to know! Oddly enough, as I developed insight into the life processes of snakes, I started to relate to them. The next turning point came with my introduction to Jimmy the fox snake. My relationship with Jimmy started out innocently enough, as I peered at him through Plexiglas. Next thing I knew, I actually wanted to touch his back while Glenda held him. That was a huge achievement from my perspective.

Over the next few months, I discovered that most of my fear was based on the unknown. The unpredictability of snakes has always been at the centre of my fear. I never understood their behaviour so I just assumed they were up to no good. Learning about why snakes do the things they do, gave me a new level of confidence. The first time I decided to hold Jimmy I was petrified, but curiosity had gotten the

better of me. I'm really glad I did it. I felt his muscles contract as he explored the crook of my arm. I got goose bumps when he smelled me with his little forked tongue (it really tickles) but I was so proud of myself for holding him and that I didn't panic and collapse. He was comfortable being held and he didn't show any interest in biting me. The next thing I knew, I was feeling almost warm and fuzzy toward him. Granted, it wasn't as warm and fuzzy as I feel towards cats and dogs, but it was a far cry from the loathsome dislike towards reptiles I'd been living with since childhood. What a relief!



This love story has a happy ending for me. But I'm a bit worried about how it will end for reptiles. The number of factors putting reptiles at risk shocks me. I've been really lucky to work with Glenda and Jimmy. As they've helped ease my fear, they have also instilled in me respect and concern for the welfare of reptiles. Very little is required of humans to help reptiles rather than hinder them. How we treat our environment, and the level of care we exercise when we travel through areas where they live, can go a long way toward helping them. I wish that everyone had the opportunity to work with Glenda and Jimmy; they're invaluable in helping people to gain knowledge and combat their fear of snakes. Of course, even with the "reptile therapy" I've been enjoying, it would be a lie if I said I'd be fine with sharing an outhouse with a snake. But one thing is for sure- I'm better off for being part of this bizarre love triangle.

Shannon Beatty
Museum On Tower Hill