

The Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake



Photo: Doug Hamilton

"For many people the presence of rattlesnakes is as much a part of Killbear as the rugged scenery"



Photo: Robert McCaw

Description

The Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake is Ontario's only venomous snake. They are heavy-bodied snakes 50 - 80 cm in length. Rattlesnakes are grey or brown with dark blotches along the back and several rows of alternating blotches along the sides. The blotches are outlined with white edges. Their belly is black. Other key features include a triangular shaped head, narrow neck and a thick body. The tail ends with a segmented rattle. If you can see the vertical pupils and heat sensitive pits located between the eyes and nostrils you are way too close!



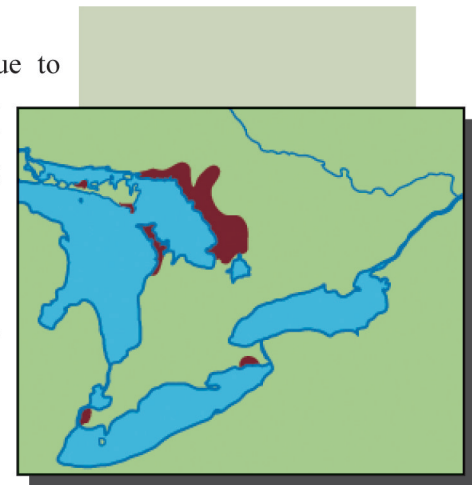
Photo: Robert McCaw

A Species At Risk

Rattlesnakes are considered threatened due to habitat loss, road mortality and human persecution. Killbear helps this species by protecting their habitat, monitoring populations and educating the public.

Where Are They?

Rattlesnakes can be found throughout Killbear and the surrounding area. They require forest, wetland and rock barren habitats.



Rattlesnake Range Map

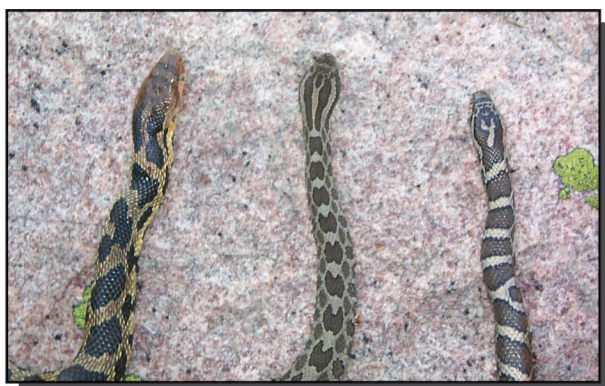
Don't Step On Me

Rattlesnakes depend on camouflage to remain undetected. If disturbed, they often retreat to a hiding spot. If a person comes too close they usually rattle a warning. If the warning is ignored the rattlesnake may bite to defend itself. In 25% of all defensive bites the snake does not inject venom.

A Rattlesnake's Life

Rattlesnake venom is designed to kill small rodents. Rattlesnakes can be active on warm nights, tracking prey with their heat sensitive pits. Red-shouldered hawks and the fisher, a member of the weasel family, can kill and eat rattlesnakes.

Rattlesnakes give birth to live young in August. Since females lose up to half their body mass giving birth, they only reproduce every second year. Rattlesnakes add a segment to their tail every time they shed their skin.



Confusing Species

Other snakes with blotches that may be mistaken for rattlesnakes include Eastern Foxsnakes, Northern Watersnakes, Eastern Hog-nosed Snakes and Eastern Milksnakes. Both milksnakes and foxsnakes will vibrate their tails if threatened. While these species don't have rattles, if their tail hits a dry leaf they can sound like a rattlesnake.

(Photo from left to right: foxsnake, rattlesnake, milksnake)



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Research at Killbear

As part of a 10-year research program at Killbear, rattlesnakes were captured, measured, weighed and implanted with a microchip so they could be identified if recaptured. Over 40 rattlesnakes were implanted with radio-transmitters that allowed us to track their movements.

Research Results

- Females rarely mature before age five. The average litter size in Killbear is 11.
- Rattlesnakes hibernate alone, or in small groups, and each snake returns to its hibernation site every year.
- Rattlesnakes that are relocated away from their territory will die when winter comes because they cannot find their hibernation site.
- Rattlesnakes are active from May-October, and may cover an area of 50 hectares or more.
- Rattlesnakes may actually change their behaviour in busy areas to reduce their chances of being seen by people.



Living With Rattlesnakes

Your chances of seeing a rattlesnake are slim due to their shy nature. Please keep the danger of snakebite in perspective. Over the past 30 years an average of 2 or 3 people per year have been bitten by rattlesnakes in Ontario. While there have been two fatalities in the past 100 years, the most recent death was over 40 years ago and neither person received proper medical attention. Most snakebites are on the foot or hand. Bites on the foot usually happen when a person accidentally steps on a rattlesnake. Most bites on the hand are caused by someone provoking the snake.

Precautions

1. Learn to identify snakes to determine the rattlesnake from other snakes.
2. Do not pick up or harass any wild snake.
3. Wear appropriate clothing while hiking or exploring. Wear long pants and shoes or boots.
4. Keep dogs on leashes.
5. Use a flashlight when walking at night.
6. Always watch where you put your hands and feet.
7. If you hear or see a rattlesnake, identify the snakes location, maintain a distance of 2 metres, and back away.

If you are bitten by a rattlesnake, immediately seek medical attention. The nearest hospital to Killbear is in Parry Sound.

How You Can Help

- Brake for snakes
- Learn about snakes and tell your friends
- Report any sightings
- Report a poacher
- Observe from a distance, do not disturb snakes that you encounter



Killbear



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