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Press Release

CO-EXISTING SAFELY WITH RATTLESNAKES ON THE AUGUST LONG WEEKEND

A note from the Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake Recovery Team

Toronto, Ontario. July 30, 2009: The Eastern Massasauga rattlesnake is a very important animal of Ontario's natural world. Unfortunately, there is a lot of misunderstanding with respect to this species and as a result it has become "Threatened" with extinction in Canada. It is our hope that people with a fact based understanding of rattlesnakes will choose to co-exist with rattlesnakes as with other wildlife near their homes and cottages. The continued presence of rattlesnakes is a reflection of the health of natural habitats that remain in Ontario!

Snake encounters may increase during periods when snakes and people are more active. July and August see an increase in the number of people visiting the Georgian Bay area. This is also when the temperatures make it more suitable for snakes to be out and about. In the summer a pregnant female will be more visible. She will spend more time in the open in order to bask in the sun to raise her body temperature in order to incubate her developing young. The key to co-existence with this species is learning how to prevent being bitten altogether.

The massasauga is a relatively shy snake. They rely on their camouflage pattern and will often hide from view to avoid being detected. They will only strike when threatened. Many bites occur as a result of people engaging in risky behaviour such as trying to capture the rattlesnake.

How can I avoid snakebite?

- Stay on the beaten path when walking in rattlesnake habitat.
- Use a flashlight at night.
- Always wear close-toed boots or shoes when hiking. The massasauga has relatively small fangs that are not likely to penetrate leather-hiking boots or loose clothing.
- Always watch where you are putting your hands and feet, do not reach into areas where you cannot see clearly.
- Do not pick up snakes or other wild animals. This is the most common cause of snakebites.
- Do not harass, chase or threaten a snake. This is the second most common cause of snakebites and is illegal due to its protected status.
- If you hear a rattlesnake, stop moving and determine the snake's location. Slowly step away and give the snake room to move away.
- Protect your pets - keep dogs on a leash when walking through rattlesnake habitat.

What do I do if I get bitten?

- Don't panic! Not all bites result in venom being injected. Twenty-five percent (25%) of all rattlesnake bites are "dry" bites.
- Stay calm and reduce movement.
- Call emergency services and get to a hospital as quickly and safely as possible.
- Clean the wound.
- Remove jewellery on the affected limb.
- **DO NOT** apply ice.
- **DO NOT** apply a tourniquet.
- **DO NOT** cut or apply suction to the bite area.

Is there a shortage of antivenom in Ontario?

- Hospitals in the range of the rattlesnake keep their own supply and the Toronto Zoo also stocks antivenom that is available to treat snakebite in Ontario.
- In the event of a shortfall, the Toronto Zoo has access to additional supplies through the Association of Zoos and Aquariums Antivenom Index.

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An informative website, prepared by the Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake Recovery Team, can be found at www.massasauga.ca

Seeing a massasauga in the wild is a unique and very special life experience - Enjoy it safely!