

Snakes Fascinating To Young and Old

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Special Writer for The Birmingham Eclectic

During many years of shared experiences in the outdoors your nature columnist has yet to find any creature which can vie with a snake for capturing the interest and imagination of adults and children alike.

Several years ago while I was serving as a guide in the Nature Cabin at the Detroit Zoological Park, I was left to calm a crowd which went into a near panic when the door of a cage of harmless garter snakes came ajar.

In general, children have a more realistic attitude toward snakes than adults, largely because we have taken great strides toward a better propagation of natural science in schools, clubs and camps.

Our present reptiles are but a small remnant of the mighty hoards which dominated our earth for millions of years during Jurassic and Tertiary times. Only four orders remain: the turtles, the crocodiles and alligators, the lizards and the snakes.

Since snakes are "cold blooded" animals which take their temperature from the surrounding air, they are most abundant in the tropics. What species are at home in our northern climes must overcome the rigors of winter by a long hibernation period.

A horrible serpent which is called a rattlesnake. It has a head like a frog and can bite off a man's leg as clear as if it had been hewn down with an ax.

We have come a long way since 1762, but it is still very difficult to convince the public that Michigan has only one poisonous snake—the massasauga rattler and that its bite is seldom fatal to a healthy adult.

Alexander Ruthven, recent president of the University of Michigan, is an authority on Michigan snakes. He describes the massasauga as short and thick-bodied attaining a length of two and a half to three feet. Its head is broadly triangular, its snout blunt. A slight cavity in the frontal region and a deep pit in the loreal region are typical of poisonous snakes.

IN COLOR the massasauga is generally gray, relieved by several series of variously sized and shaped blotches of dark brown. These are edged with inner black and outer pale yellow.

The spots are irregularly oblong in form shading in crossbands on the tail. The color underneath is black broken with pale yellow.

The young of the massasauga is common with their kind are self-sufficient at birth.

About half of our Michigan snakes are hatched from eggs, but the little "saunders" are born alive in small litters and are not more than six inches long.

Like their parents they feed largely on rodents; first on small mice, later on rats. These they exterminate with a relish which makes this snake decidedly beneficial to man.

The rattler, at the end of the tail, consists of a series of tough

dry segments loosely fastened together.

CONTRARY TO popular opinion, a snake's age cannot be determined from the number of rattles present, for a new one develops each time the skin is shed. This occurs on an average of three times a year.

When the tail is rapidly vibrated (at a rate of about 48 cycles per second) a distinctive hiss or buzz is produced which is quite unlike any other sound. Herpetologists doubt that its purpose is to warn a possibly victim but it does serve as a warning to possible enemies.

Snakes have no separate hearing organs but it is probable that they receive distinct vibrations through the delicate tips of their forked tongues and perhaps through the sensitivity of the scales which cover their bodies.

The massasauga prefers swampy lands and he is frequently present in these areas in the middle and lower portions of our lower peninsula. He is also reported from Charly and Bois Blanc Islands in the Straits and from St. Ignace county in the upper peninsula.

Man is his ever-present enemy and he is killed by farmers, tourists and fishermen. As swamps and marshes are drained, his favorite haunts are destroyed so that he is becoming rarer with each season.

BECAUSE we cannot the stream for many summers, we frequently saw the massasauga along the swamps of the Au Sable river.

Several years ago a bog near Spruce cabin on the main stream yielded 21 specimens in a single snake hunt. The massasauga is commonly found in the vicinity of the Pontiac area. Two weeks ago we encountered a 36 inch specimen in a bog near Bennett Lake west of Pontiac.

The "sauger" is only remotely related to the big diamondback, timber and prairie rattlesnakes. However, the venom, unit for unit, is as virulent but because there is less of it and the mechanism for introducing it is less efficient, the massasauga is not as dangerous as many suppose.

IF YOU USE the precaution of wearing high boots, you can travel in safety for this rattler is too short to strike above the knee. He is also rather sluggish in habit. On a mid-October afternoon at Proud Lake, I almost stepped on one already loopy at the approach of the hibernating period.

In addition to the massasauga there are 15 other species of snakes in Michigan, all harmless to man. Those which include insects and rodents in their diet, such as the garter snake and the black snake (respectively) are decidedly beneficial. Do not label any species "good" or "bad". Snakes like every other living thing have their own certain life in the complicated web of life.

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RECIPIENT OF THE UNIVERSITY of Michigan Regent Alumnae Scholarship is Dorothy Ojala (right), daughter of Mrs. Marion Ojala of Ann street. Also winner of a regional extemporaneous speech contest, she is pictured with Mrs. William Jahnsman of Franklin Hills, representative to the U of M Alumnae council in Ann Arbor. An accomplished pianist, Dorothy has performed in a professional capacity before several local organizations.

Unusual Job Earns Scholarship Fund

When the wives of Oakland county's osteopathic doctors decided to raise funds for a nursing scholarship at the hospital in Philadelphia, each member was asked to raise a certain amount through some project she sponsored.

The group met in Berkley last week and reports were given. There were the customary cocktail parties, birthday pennies and selling campaigns.

NOT UNTIL Mrs. R. A. Wilson of Cheshamford was called upon did the "different" touch appear—Mrs. Wilson earned her contribution by dog sitting.

Some friends were out of town for the weekend, she explained, and I took care of their dog. It's as simple as that. However, I am earning the balance of my quota in a more positive way—a card party in the near future.

To Tour California

Mr. and Mrs. LeRoy Braisted of North Woodward avenue left by plane June 1 for six weeks tour of California. While there, they will attend the AIRE convention in Los Angeles.

Elected to Scroll

Carolyn Snyder, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. M. E. Snyder of Kenwood court, has been elected to Scroll, honorary senior society for affiliated women, at the University of Michigan.

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