

localnews

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LIVING

No more snakes in the grass?

Harmless, helpful reptiles increasingly endangered in Ontario

Last week, I looked at the somewhat precarious future faced by turtles in the Kawarthas. Another group of reptiles, namely snakes, isn't fairing much better. The Kawarthas is home to nine snake species. However, almost all of Ontario's snake species have severely declined over the last century, and their ranges have shrunk dramatically. Three species of our local snakes have been designated as species of special concern (also called "vulnerable") and one is considered threatened. Our one and only lizard, the five-lined skink, is also a species of special concern. There are no rattlesnakes, or other venomous species in the Kawarthas.



Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS



DREW MONKMAN photo

Eastern garter snake (45 - 70 cm) By far our most common snake, the garter snake is named because of its likeness to the striped garters (a band worn around the leg to hold up a stocking) historically worn by men. Garter snakes are dark in colour with three yellowish stripes extending the length of the body. Reddish-orange markings along the sides are often present, as well. Common food items include frogs, worms and sometimes even mice. Like most snakes, garter snakes have scent glands that exude a strong, persistent musky odour if caught. They will also occasionally bite if handled.

Northern ribbon snake (45 - 66 cm) This slender, striped snake, is quite similar in size and appearance to the garter snake. However, it is slimmer, the stripes are more defined, and it has a small white spot just in front of each eye. Ribbon snakes occur in wetlands throughout Peterborough County but are more common in the northern half. Since 2002, it has been designated by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) as a species of special concern.

Northern water snake (61 - 106 cm) A relatively common snake of lakeshores, river margins and swamps, water snakes spend most of their time foraging along the water's edge in search of fish, frogs, tadpoles, and salamanders. A thick-bodied snake, this species can be quite variable in colour and pattern. Typically, however, water snakes have dark crossbands on a background colour of light gray to dark brown. Although water snakes are not dangerous, they will bite if handled.

“Reptiles need sunlight to help them digest their food, so they often lay on logs, rocks, and roads.”

Brown snake (23 - 33 cm) A timid, nocturnal species, this small snake is brown with a beige belly. Small black spots are often present along the back. Brown snakes are sometimes found when people move rocks, pieces of wood, or other debris. They rarely bite but will release musk from their anal glands. Gardeners like them because of their habit of eating slugs. There have only been a handful of reports of this snake in Peterborough County.

Northern redbelly snake (20 - 25 cm) Similar to the brown snake, the smaller redbelly has a red or orange belly. Although fairly common in the Kawarthas, the redbelly is quite secretive and is usually only discovered when a hiding place is exposed. Slugs make up most of its diet. The redbelly has never been known to bite in self-defense.

Smooth green snake (30 - 51 cm)

This unpatterned, slender, bright green snake is difficult to confuse with any other snake in Ontario. It is widespread but uncommon locally. It mostly eats arthropods such as grasshoppers, crickets, caterpillars and also spiders. Areas like fields and open woodlands that support a ground cover of thick green vegetation are the preferred habitats of green snakes. Green snakes are extremely fast movers but rarely bite when handled.

Eastern hognose snake (50 - 84 cm) Thick-bodied with an upturned snout, the hognose is extremely variable in appearance. However, it is usually well-patterned on the back with a background colour of yellow, gray, pinkish brown, olive, or black. Hognose snakes seem to require sandy soils and can be found in sandy woodlands, fields and farmland. Toads are their preferred prey. An encounter with a hognose snake can be quite an experience. Although harmless and inoffensive, this species has a number of tricks up its sleeve when threatened. It will suck in air, spread the skin around its head and neck like a cobra, hiss with its mouth agape, rear up and lunge as if to strike. However, it closes its mouth before striking and therefore almost never bites. If all of this doesn't work, the hognose snake has one last strategy to try, namely rolling over on its back and playing dead. Due to these frightening behaviours, hognose snakes are often



DREW MONKMAN photo

killed by people who think they are venomous and dangerous. It is also unusually vulnerable to road traffic because it moves slowly. This rare species is declining and is designated as threatened in Ontario. They are sometimes found in Petroglyphs Provincial Park.

Northern ringneck snake (25 - 38 cm) A small, secretive but very pretty snake, the ringneck is known from scattered reports in the northern part of Peterborough County. It is dark on the back with smooth scales. The belly is bright yellow or orange and a matching ring encircles the neck. Nocturnal and shy, ringnecks prefer moist woodlands where they find their main prey item, the red-backed salamander. These snakes can occasionally be found when looking under rocks or logs. Increased concern for this species resulted in a national COSEWIC designation of special concern in 2002.

Eastern milk snake (60 - 90 cm) Milk snakes are widespread in Peterborough County but very uncommon. They are a slender but boldly-patterned snake. Typically, the milk snake has a light gray to tan body covered with reddish-brown blotches bordered in black. The belly is covered with a black and white checkerboard pattern. Milk snakes are often mistaken for rattlesnakes and therefore

The eastern garter snake (top) is by far the most common snake found in Ontario, and in the Kawarthas. It is named for its resemblance to the striped garters men use to wear to keep their stockings up. The northern redbelly snake (left) is fairly common in the Kawarthas but is seldom seen. Unlike those two, four of the nine species of snakes that are native to the Kawarthas are endangered to some extent.

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killed. This is because of their habit of rapidly vibrating their tail when threatened. The vibrations can produce a buzzing sound if the tail touches the ground. Their name comes from an old belief that they could somehow milk cows. They also sometimes turn up around barns and other out buildings. Most farmers now realize that this species is actually of great benefit because its primary diet is rodents. Although they are not very aggressive, milk snakes will bite and spray musk if handled. Milk snakes have been designated as a species of special concern by COSEWIC.

Five-lined skink Ontario's only lizard can also be found in the Kawarthas, especially on open Canadian Shield rock outcrops that face south. Skinks are seldom seen by the casual observer, however, because they are small and

fast-moving. They are most easily found in the morning hours by carefully overturning rocks and logs, being sure to replace them afterwards. Colouration varies depending on the age. Juveniles and young adult females are glossy black with five cream stripes on the back and bright blue to grey tail. Males and older females gradually fade in colour to a uniform bronze. Males in breeding condition have a bright orange chin and jaw. The skink has been designated by COSEWIC as a species of special concern.

There are still numerous threats to the continued survival of Ontario's snakes. Habitat loss is the greatest single concern. Southern Ontario, where the greatest number of species lives, has been dramatically altered by human activities such as deforestation, agriculture, and urbanization. Many snake species are now restricted to islands of habitat amid an ocean of human development. Destruction of wetland habitat has been particularly harmful for reptiles of all kinds. In the last 200 years, southern Ontario has lost an incredible 70% of its wetlands.

Snakes are also very vulnerable to being run over on roads. This can reduce or eliminate a population even where suitable habitat remains. The problem is that snakes don't simply cross the roads; they use them as a place to soak up sun. Reptiles need sunlight to help them digest their food, so they often lay on logs, rocks, and roads. Road surfaces are not only warm during the day, but remain warm until well after dark. This means that snakes will often crawl out onto roads after sundown to take advantage of the heat they provide. Unfortunately, very few drivers ever think of watching out for snakes, and an uneducated few will even swerve intentionally to hit them. As in the case of turtles, reducing road mortality is critical to conserving many of our snake species.

Sadly, many people do not like snakes and will intentionally harass or even kill them because of a completely unjustifiable belief that they are dangerous, evil, or simply useless. This is not only indefensible but also ecologically unsound, given the important role snakes play in the food chain. It is also illegal in Ontario! The timber rattlesnake was wiped out from Canada because of deliberate persecution. Unfortunately, these arguments have little resonance with some people, and large numbers of snakes continue to be killed. Species such as the hognose snake with its intimidating behaviours, and the milk snake which imitates a rattlesnake by vibrating its tail in dry leaves, pay a particularly heavy price. It's important to speak up when you see or hear of people persecuting snakes. Putting an end to such moronic behaviour would be a major step forward in snake conservation. However, it might be too much to hope for.

Many animals, such as raccoons and skunks, prey upon snakes. Because of the greatly increased numbers of these predators, many more snakes are eaten than can be sustained. This can greatly reduce or even eliminate snakes from some areas. Even cats are major predators of snakes in central and southern Ontario. This is another good reason to keep your cat indoors.

The Natural Heritage Information Centre (NHIC) here in Peterborough records the locations of species at risk throughout Ontario. You can help. If you see a snake that is one of the species at risk, report your sighting on the web at:

www.mnr.gov.on.ca/mnr/nhic

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