



Time for Nature



Hangin' out in the islands

The eastern ratsnake in St. Lawrence Islands National Park of Canada

The snake is huge, by Canadian standards! The eastern ratsnake, Canada's largest snake, can be up to 2.5 m long. It's a constrictor; ratsnakes feed on mice, rats and birds, first suffocating their prey within the tight coils of their bodies. But thankfully, the ratsnake is harmless to people, and really quite vulnerable. Remember that, if you are out wandering in St. Lawrence National Park of Canada, and spot one hanging from a tree!



The eastern ratsnake grows up to 2.5 m long. © Simon Lunn.

Ratsnakes are excellent climbers, and take to the trees to hunt bird eggs or nestlings, or just to relax. (A favourite snake pastime is hanging out, especially after a large meal).

In Canada, the eastern ratsnake occurs only in Ontario, and the park holds one of several distinct populations of this threatened species. Look for a shiny black snake with a white or cream chin and throat. (Some adults vary in colour.)

The eastern ratsnake has a few strikes against it

If you do spot a ratsnake, consider yourself lucky! Today, ratsnake populations are small and isolated from each other. Like other snake species, ratsnakes have suffered from habitat loss as land is cleared for agriculture, urbanization and cottage development. And although the snakes may live up to 25 years, they are slow to reach sexual maturity, and reproduce only every two years. This limits the growth rate of their populations. They cannot quickly replenish their numbers if individuals are killed.



St. Lawrence Islands National Park holds one of several distinct populations of the eastern ratsnake. © Parks Canada, B. Morin, 1994.

Even in hibernation, the snakes can be vulnerable. Adults over-winter communally in hibernacula, which may hold 30 to 50 snakes, including members of other species. They return to the same hibernacula every year. If these small areas were to be disturbed, the consequences could be serious.



Getting to know the species

Fortunately for Parks Canada researchers studying the snake, the ratsnake is easier to catch than many other species. Its large size makes it relatively conspicuous. And researchers can capture large numbers when they emerge from their hibernacula in the spring.

Once they capture a snake, scientists attach a radio transmitter or mark the individual with a microchip. The transmitters track the snakes' movements, giving researchers valuable information about the snake's use of its home territories. And with the microchips, scientists can identify each snake with a sensor. Together, these technologies provide a great deal of information about the snakes' activity patterns, habitat use and preferred temperature conditions.

Making progress in conservation

The eastern ratsnake provides an interesting lesson about human progress. It was in the name of progress that human settlement encroached on the lands that used to provide the eastern ratsnake with abundant habitat. Yet now, it is progress that has led to the technology that allows scientists to study the eastern ratsnake and perhaps ensure its survival.

For more information visit www.pc.gc.ca/sli



Researchers are studying the snake's movements and habitat use. © Simon Lunn.