

RATTLESNAKE

POPULATION UNDER PRESSURE

People may encounter prairie rattlesnakes when exploring our coulees or occasionally in urban areas.

The information that follows is intended to help people co-exist safely with these shy creatures.

Restoring lost rattlesnake populations is a difficult uphill battle.

For thousands of years, rattlesnakes have lived on the plains, now occupied by various residential subdivisions.

Direct habitat loss and road mortality are two significant problems putting the current population under pressure.



Rattlesnakes have extremely low reproductive rates. Females reach breeding maturity between 4 and 7 years of age. At most, they breed every other year. In many cases they breed in 3 or 4 year intervals. Breeding occurs in summer. On average, about 10 babies will be born the following year in late summer or fall.

Baby rattlesnakes are about the size of a pencil and they have many predators. The vast majority do not see their first birthday. It's important to note that baby rattlesnakes are still venomous and are unable to warn you of their whereabouts because they lack a rattle.

LIFE OF A PRAIRIE RATTLESNAKE

January	Hibernating
February	Hibernating
March	Periodically leave den during warm weather
April	Emerge from hibernation
May	Leave den in search of food
June	Sun basking & feeding on prey
July	Sun basking & feeding Mating season begins
August	Start migration back to den site
September	Stay close to den in case of cold weather
October	Periodically in den during cold weather
November	Begin hibernation
December	Hibernating

WHERE THEY LIVE

Prairie rattlesnakes are found in southeastern Alberta and southwestern Saskatchewan.

Here in Lethbridge the largest populations are on the west side of the Oldman River, near Cottonwood Park. The most common area where rattlesnakes are encountered is near Popson Park. A small population is known to live north of the Elizabeth Hall Wetlands. Rare sightings have occurred in North Lethbridge near the Pavan Park region and south towards the Alexander Wilderness area.

Rattlesnakes spend much of their time on dry coulee slopes, but will wander into cottonwood forests and wetlands in search of food. The benchland, or top of coulees where housing subdivisions now sit, were once critical summer habitat for these snakes.

DIET

Prairie rattlesnakes are an important part of the mixed-grass prairie ecosystem, as they play a critical role in the local food web.

Much of a rattlesnake's diet consists of mice, voles and shrews. Thus, they help to control these species and reduce the risk of transmittable disease to humans, like Hantavirus. They also eat ground squirrels, insects and occasionally frogs, rabbits and birds.

BULLSNAKE

Bullsnares play an essential role in the grassland ecosystem. Very few bullsnares have survived in our area due to significant habitat loss and fragmentation caused by human development.

Bullsnares are constrictors and are non-venomous. They are active and opportunistic feeders, seeking out rodent holes or nests. They spend more time underground in the summer months than other snake species borrowing their prey's den and conserving precious energy.

Escape is always the first line of defense for a snake. If a bullsnake feels cornered or threatened, it will not hesitate to strike and bite. Bullsnares will flatten their head, puff up their body with air, and hiss loudly. Although they do not actually possess a tail rattle, they will imitate rattlesnakes by coiling up and rapidly shaking their tail, which makes a buzzing sound when in contact with leaves or dry grass.

Bullsnares

- Bullsnares are longer & leaner looking than rattlesnakes
- Yellow colouring heavily mottled with patches of black & rusty browns
- Blunt or rounded head
- Average length 6 feet



Rattlesnake

- Rattlesnakes are shorter and chunkier than bullsnares
- Olive green, yellow and brown tones
- Well-defined, arrow-shaped head
- Rarely longer than 3 to 4 feet



All photo credit: Ken Moore

HOW TO AVOID RATTLESNAKE ENCOUNTERS

Rattlesnakes are masters of camouflage. Make sure you remain alert and be aware of your surroundings when hiking in the coulees, especially when you are in the natural areas of southwestern Lethbridge. Stay on established trails.



Your first indication of a nearby rattlesnake may be the rasp of its rattle. This is the snake's way of getting your attention to warn you of its presence. Do not step or jump over large rocks and logs without checking to see what is on the other side. Rattlesnakes can feel the vibration of your footsteps through the ground.

Keep your dog on a leash. A snake will likely defend itself by striking a dog that ignores the warning signs.

IF YOU ENCOUNTER A RATTLESNAKE...

**Back away slowly. Remain calm.
Give the snake space.**

Rattlesnakes are not aggressive and given a choice will retreat rather than strike. However, if surprised, stepped on or cornered they can strike up to a distance about half of their length. People should never run when encountering a snake as there may be more than one in the immediate area.

It is estimated that up to 20% of their bites are dry (no venom is injected). Prairie rattlesnake venom is not particularly lethal and no one has died from a prairie rattlesnake bite in Alberta. Almost every year dogs are bitten by rattlesnakes in Lethbridge. They usually recover after several days of treatment with steroids and antibiotics.

WHAT TO DO IF BITTEN BY A RATTLESNAKE

Remain calm and get to the hospital as soon as possible.

Do not try to suck or cut the venom out – it is very quickly absorbed into the bloodstream. Early treatment of rattlesnake bites will normally result in a complete recovery. Contact a veterinarian if your pet has been bitten.

STATUS

In Alberta all snakes, their denning sites and overwintering dens are protected.

It is illegal to harass, hurt or kill rattlesnakes.

THERE ARE SEVERE PENALTIES FOR EVEN FIRST TIME OFFENDERS.

WHO TO CALL

For more information about rattlesnakes:

Helen Schuler Nature Centre | 403-320-3064

Alberta Fish & Wildlife | 403-381-5266



To have a rattlesnake removed from an urban or recreational area:

Rattlesnake Call Line | 403-332-6806

Living with Rattlesnakes in Lethbridge



WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW



CITY OF
Lethbridge