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Chicago Tribune



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CHICAGOLAND

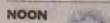
Snakes on the plains

The last known rattlesnakes still living in the Chicago area are being rounded up in an emergency species survival rescue effort. **PAGE 6**

WEATHER

7 A.M.

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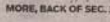
NOON

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6 P.M.

67



MORE, BACK OF SEC. 3

SPORTS

Blackhawks vs. Canucks tonight

Vancouver is well rested after its four-game playoff sweep over St. Louis. Will that give them the edge?

SPORTS, BACK PAGE

This roundup, rattlesnakes win

Biologists to capture reptiles, breed them to healthy numbers

By William Mullen
TRIBUNE REPORTER

The last known rattlesnakes still living in the Chicago area are being rounded up in an emergency species survival rescue effort.

Jointly conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and Lincoln Park Zoo, the roundup is sending snakes to the zoo and an eventual captive breeding program likely to take a decade or more. The idea is to breed the reptiles, eastern massasauga rattlesnakes, back to a large and healthy enough population so they can be restored to area wilderness locations, including forest and nature preserves.

The native species is so shy and retiring that it has managed to remain here from the city's frontier beginnings through today.

"They aren't a very rattling rattlesnake," said Joanne Earnhardt, a population biologist at Lincoln Park Zoo who chairs the North American species survival plan for the snake. She said there are few recorded instances of them biting humans.

"They only grow up to 2 feet long and are very shy, something you don't expect in a rattlesnake," Earnhardt said. "They have a behavior of being very quiet and still, even

PROFILE

Eastern massasauga rattlesnake

Average adult size:
24-30 inches

Diet: Rodents, snakes and ground-nesting birds

Range: Southeastern Canada and central and western U.S., including northeastern Illinois

Habitat: Shallow wetlands, open grasslands and isolated shrubs

Characteristics: Venomous, timid, usually stays in coiled position

Hibernation: December to February/March

SOURCE: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service; photo by Michael Redmer

TRIBUNE



if you are within inches of them, hoping you will go away."

In Cook, DuPage, Will and Lake Counties over the next month and in springtime over the next several years, biologists will systematically search for the rattlesnake at sites where it was known to live in the past.

The massasauga (pronounced massa-SAW-guh) was relatively common in the four counties until a few decades ago, but annual searches for them that began in 2005 found them in only one isolated wetland area. Fearing pet collectors or vandals might descend on that location and remove or destroy the snakes, officials decline to identify where it is.

"We have been studying them for years and have watched their dramatic de-

cline," said Joe Kath, the state Natural Resources Department's endangered species project manager. "We came to the difficult realization that we had two choices: We either watch them completely disappear from northeastern Illinois, or we take this action and bring them back to a healthy, viable population."

On Friday, biologists conducting the rescue search found an adult female massasauga at the single isolated area, and on Monday, they found an adult male there.

"It is a beautiful snake," Earnhardt said. "It is beige, black and gray with large dark blotches on its skin that are different on each snake."

In long summer grass in the wetlands, ponds, swamps, fens and grasslands where they normally live, their camouflage is so perfect they are

extremely difficult to spot, she said. Springtime, while wild grasses are still short, is the easiest time to spot them when they are leaving the crawfish burrows where they have spent the winter.

"If you are bitten by one, it is serious, but their venom is not extremely potent and life-threatening, as it can be from more dangerous venomous snakes," Earnhardt said. "In fact, massasaugas can control when they do and don't use venom as they bite, and they might not use it biting a human because they would recognize humans are not prey; just something they want to scare away."

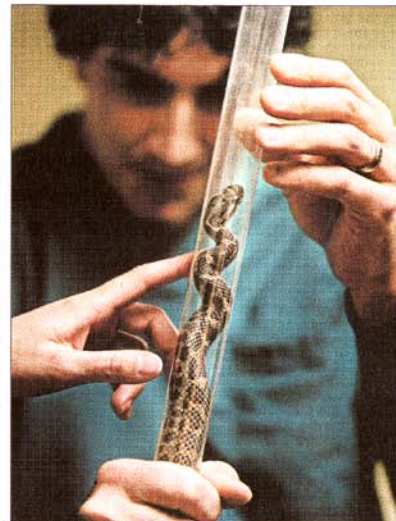
In nature, they are crucial to their habitats, working as ambush hunters popping out of long grass to kill and eat mice, voles, shrews and rats, keeping down their populations.

Robert Kennicott, the most important early naturalist in Chicago, collected and preserved many massasauga specimens in the 1850s that can be found in natural history collections, said Michael Redmer, a staff biologist at the Fish and Wildlife Service's regional office.

"Up to the early 1990s, the [massasauga] snake was fairly easy to observe if you knew the places to look for them," Redmer said.

The snake is on the Illinois endangered species list and is a strong candidate to go on the federal endangered or threatened species list, he said.

There are three distinct ge-



Lincoln Park Zoo's Dan Boehm examines an eastern massasauga rattlesnake. The zoo is part of an effort to rescue the endangered snake in northeastern Illinois. KUNI TAKAHASHI/TRIBUNE PHOTO

netic groups of the species, one that resides in Ontario, New York and Pennsylvania; another in Michigan, Indiana and Ohio; and a third in Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa.

"That was the prevailing attitude then—they are venomous and no good, so get them out. It is a sad thing. The snake can't help that it is venomous."

"Up until the late 1960s, you

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