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**Local Wildlife Agencies Unite to Save Last Remaining Endangered Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnakes in the Region**

*Cooperative effort by local, state and federal conservation agencies salvages last wild individuals; Lincoln Park Zoo leads Species Survival Plan efforts; launches new study*

Chicago, Ill – An iconic local species, the eastern massasauga rattlesnake, is quickly slithering toward extinction. Wildlife authorities have concluded the dire situation requires drastic, immediate conservation action to save the last remaining snakes in northeastern Illinois to avoid local extinction.

The US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) and Lincoln Park Zoo have united to conserve this species through capture and recovery efforts.

“Considerable scientific data indicate eastern massasauga rattlesnakes (EMR) will vanish forever if the remaining snakes aren’t found. This is an emergency situation and we must act now,” said Joe Kath, IDNR endangered species project manager.

The snakes have declined significantly throughout their entire range due to the magnitude of habitat loss, persecution and collection for the illegal pet trade. The goal of the recovery effort is to locate the last remaining snakes in northeastern Illinois, and place them in appropriate propagation facilities, including Lincoln Park Zoo, in an effort to bolster the population and ensure the species long term survival. The long term goal is to increase their numbers, secure local habitat and eventually reintroduce them to the wild.

While EMR live in small pockets from western New York and southern Ontario to southern Iowa and northeastern Missouri, a recent genetic study identified three distinctive genetic groupings of EMR in North America. The northeastern Illinois snake population is a distinct variation that will be lost forever if swift conservation action isn’t taken.

“Substantial evidence suggests the Chicago-area population has reached critically low numbers, and is unlikely to recover to a sustainable level in the wild under existing

conditions. Drastic action is needed now if we are to salvage this unique genetic group of eastern massasauga,” said Michael Redmer, a Herpetologist at the USFWS Chicago Field Office.

Rattlesnakes are an iconic species that serve a crucial role in the Illinois ecosystem as both a highly evolved predator and as prey. As predators, rattlesnakes control mice and rat populations, thereby reducing the spread of diseases like Lyme and Hantavirus. Rattlesnakes also are a prey species hunted by hawks, owls, cranes and some mammals.

Additionally, rattlesnake venom may serve an important role in human medicine. Researchers are currently studying the benefits of its use in certain drugs and medications.

“Sadly there are very few snakes left, and we have an ethical obligation to conserve them,” said Joanne Earnhardt, Ph.D., Director of the Alexander Center for Applied Population Biology at Lincoln Park Zoo who serves as the EMR Species Survival Plan coordinator.

Historically, zoos have served a critical role in recovery efforts when species are teetering on the brink of extinction. Some of these recovery efforts include California condors, red wolves, golden lion tamarins, black footed ferrets, Guam rails, trumpeter swans and more.

## **Lincoln Park Zoo Spearheads Five-Year Massasauga Study**

In addition to local recovery efforts underway in northeastern Illinois, Lincoln Park Zoo is spearheading the EMR Species Survival Plan’s five-year study of a key population of EMRs at Big Rock Valley, headquarters of the Edward Lowe Foundation. The study launches in early May.

Big Rock Valley is a 2,600-acre property of forests, lakes, ponds and streams in southwestern Michigan. This population of snakes is genetically different than those ranging in northeastern Illinois.

“The goal of the study is to locate as many rattlesnakes as possible and follow them over several years,” said Earnhardt.

Earnhardt noted that many of the existing studies on massasaugas have been focused on behavior or habitat. “In contrast, a longitudinal study that follows individual snakes will give us a better idea about survival and reproduction rates,” she said.

The Foundation’s Big Rock Valley was selected for the longitudinal study due to its known population of massasaugas, explained Lisa Faust, Ph.D., Lincoln Park Zoo research biologist who serves as the EMR SSP’s field adviser.

Big Rock Valley has a wide variety of ecosystems and habitats, including wetlands, which are the massasaugas’ preferred habitat.

“To better understand the health of the population, we need to track what occurs with individual animals over time,” Faust explains. “Luckily, massasaugas can be identified individually by their different coloration patterns, which are known as saddles. But as a backup, we’ll also implant the snakes with small transponders — the kind used to identify pets — that can be read with a special scanner when snakes are recaptured in future years.”

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#### **ABOUT LINCOLN PARK ZOO**

Lincoln Park Zoo, a historic Chicago landmark founded in 1868, is dedicated to connecting people with nature by providing a free, family-oriented wildlife experience. A leader in conservation science both globally and locally, the zoo exemplifies the highest quality animal care and educational outreach. The not-for-profit zoo, managed by The Lincoln Park Zoological Society, is a member-supported organization and one of the nation’s only free, privately managed zoos. For more information, call 312 -742-2000 or visit [www.lpzoo.org](http://www.lpzoo.org).

#### **ABOUT US FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE:**

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service.

#### **ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES:**

**Mission Statement:** To manage, conserve and protect Illinois' natural, recreational and cultural resources, further the public's understanding and appreciation of those resources, and promote the education, science and public safety of Illinois' natural resources for present and future generations.

#### **ABOUT THE EDWARD LOWE FOUNDATION:**

Established in 1985, the Edward Lowe Foundation is a nonprofit organization that supports entrepreneurship through research, recognition and educational programs. In addition, the foundation has a secondary mission of land stewardship and is committed to preserving the natural resources and historically significant structures at Big Rock Valley, its 2,600-acre home in southwest Michigan.