

# RATTLESNAKES

Please, as you drive around in the Park, help save our snakes by watching for and avoiding snakes basking on the paved and gravelled roads.

## RATTLESNAKES!

The word strikes fear into the hearts of many, but it is a fear which is undeserved. Prairie rattlesnakes are occasionally seen at Writing-on-Stone, but there is no need for visitors to be concerned. To find out more about this fascinating creature and to learn about "snake safety", spend a few moments reading this Fact Sheet.

## RATTLERS AND YOU

Although prairie rattlesnakes are venomous, their bites are seldom fatal to humans and rattlers rarely strike at large moving objects unless they are provoked. Contrary to popular opinion, prairie rattlesnakes are very timid creatures and will try to escape from humans if given the chance. **Leave them alone and they will leave you alone!**

## RATTLESNAKE IDENTIFICATION

The prairie rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridis viridis*) shows a great variation in colour, from olive green to dark brown, but always with dark blotches along the back. Adult rattlesnakes grow to be 1 m to 1.5 m (3 1/4 feet to 5 feet) long. They can be distinguished from the Bull Snake by their broad, triangular head and the rattle (up to 5 cm, or 2 inches long) on the end of their tails.



Rattlesnakes have a triangular head



Rattle may be absent or it may have several sections



Rattlesnakes have dark blotches on their back



Credit: Don Stewart



## RATTLESNAKE LIFESTYLE

The open grassland and rocky outcrops of Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park provides ideal habitat for the prairie rattlesnake. In southern Alberta, this snake is at the northern extent of its range. Our northern climate forces prairie rattlesnakes to spend most of their lives in a dormant state, huddled in dens (hibernacula) below the frost line.

Mating may occur in May, just after the rattlers have emerged from their hibernacula and before they disperse for the summer, or it may take place in late summer. These snakes are live-bearing and the young are born in the following September or early October.

Young rattlesnakes are born with fangs and venom, but not rattles. Instead, each has a small button on the end of its tail and will be able to rattle after it has shed twice. Every time a rattlesnake sheds, it adds another segment to its rattle and the young snake needs at least two segments to be able to produce noise. Under optimal conditions, rapidly growing young rattlesnakes may shed as many as five times during a summer. As adults they may shed once or twice a summer. Thus, the number of segments possessed by a rattlesnake does not indicate its age.

In the summer months, rattlers may disperse to as far as 30 km from their hibernacula. During the day, they lie in wait for their prey to approach within striking distance, which is two-thirds of their body length. They eat small rodents, rabbits, birds, reptiles and amphibians. With lightning speed, the rattlesnake strikes its prey and injects the venom from its extended hypodermic fangs. The venom soon immobilizes the prey and then the snake swallows it whole.

Rattlesnakes use their keen sense of smell, which is aided by their tongues, to help locate victims. At night, or when hunting in darkness in burrows and caves, rattlers also use special heat-sensing pits found between their eyes and nostrils to locate prey.

## Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park *Áísínai'pi* . . . National Historic Site

# PARK NOTES

As fall approaches, the rattlesnakes return to their dens in preparation for winter. By the end of October, the rattlers are once again below ground, waiting for the arrival of warm spring weather. They will emerge again when the air temperature is above 10°C. As a result, they have very rarely been seen on unseasonably warm December days here at Writing-on-Stone.

### VISITING RATTLESNAKE COUNTRY

While in the Park, visitors should take a few simple precautions:

- Stay on trails; avoid rock piles and bushes.
- Stay out of long grass – snakes are perfectly camouflaged to hide well in the grass (snake in the grass!);
- Don't put hands and feet in cracks, holes and crevices, or in or under bushes;
- Don't walk under ledges or reach above you if you can't see where you are putting your hands. Rattlesnakes can climb and like to bask on ledges, so there might be one above you!
- Don't touch or handle snakes that look dead. Sometimes mature rattlesnakes have no rattle, so **DO NOT handle any snakes!**
- Don't poke snakes, or throw things at them. Not only will you disturb them and make them more likely to strike, **it is against the law to harm or harass any animals in the Park, including snakes!**

Rattlesnakes will often **BUT NOT ALWAYS** make a distinctive buzzing sound with their rattles if you approach too closely. If you hear this sound, do not panic. Stand still and look around you until you locate the snake. Do not jump back first. Often rattlesnakes will not rattle until you have passed by, so one could be right behind you! Once you see the snake, slowly move away from it. Rattlesnakes usually only strike at a human if they feel threatened by being cornered, or stepped on. In the unlikely event that you are bitten:

- stay calm, remember your life is not in danger and most bites that are treated do not result in permanent damage;
- try to avoid running or other unnecessary movement since these actions may increase the spread of venom;
- if possible, immobilize the bitten area and keep it below heart level;
- locate a park staff member immediately, or failing that, go immediately to the hospital in the Town of Milk River;
- **do not** use any "John Wayne" heroics such as slashing the bite wound, sucking out the venom or applying a tourniquet;
- **do not try to capture or kill the snake; leave it alone!**

By following these precautions, you will be at very little risk if you meet a rattlesnake. Enjoy the experience of seeing one of nature's most fascinating creatures!

For more information, please talk with the park staff, or contact the park office:

Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park  
Box 297  
Milk River, Alberta T0K 1M0  
(403) 647-2364



Credit: Alberta Conservation Association

*Always give rattlesnakes room to escape*

### Prairie Rattlesnake Distribution In Alberta



*Prairie rattlesnakes are an important  
species in grassland ecosystems*

### HELP SAVE A TREE!

If you no longer require this brochure,  
please return it to park staff so it can be  
recycled or reused.

### For more information, contact:

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Box 297  
Milk River, Alberta T0K 1M0  
(403) 647-2364  
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