

Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake

Sistrurus catenatus



Status: **Threatened**

Threats:

- ◆ Habitat loss and fragmentation as development and roads are built in their existing range
- ◆ Road mortality
- ◆ Human persecution
- ◆ Pet trade



Photo: Joe Crowley

Description:

- ◆ Ontario's only venomous snake
- ◆ Only Ontario snake with vertical pupils
- ◆ Size between 47-76 cm
- ◆ Colour generally grey to brownish grey; belly black
- ◆ Body has darker blotches along the back and several rows of alternating blotches along the sides; blotches edged in white
- ◆ Tail is thick, squarish; ends in a segmented rattle
- ◆ Head is diamond-shaped with white stripes along jaw; neck is narrower than head and body
- ◆ Heat sensitive pits are located between the eye and nostril

Biology:

- ◆ Gives birth every other year to live young in Aug
- ◆ Venomous; will only bite if heavily provoked
- ◆ Relies on pattern and remaining motionless to go undetected; may rattle if threatened
- ◆ Eats small mammals and birds

Habitat:

- ◆ Found in the Georgian Bay area
- ◆ Summer: found in dry, upland sites
- ◆ Spring & Fall: found in forested wetlands
- ◆ Winter: hibernates underground in damp sites such as caves, tree root cavities, and animal burrows
- ◆ Prefers semi-open areas that provide cover and areas to bask

Species at Risk
STEWARDS' GUIDE SERIES

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How to *Move A Snake*

Massasauga Rattlesnake on Your Property? *Here's What You Can Do:*

- ◆ **If you see a Massasauga Rattlesnake, leave it alone.** It may only be passing through to reach a preferred area for hibernation or summer feeding. It will continue on within a few hours or a couple days if you allow it safe passage. Make sure other people on your property know you've seen it so they won't be so surprised to come across it, and won't accidentally get too close to it.
- ◆ **Live and let live:**
 - ✓ Learn to appreciate these animals and the fact that we are lucky enough to have one of the few areas in Ontario where populations are still relatively healthy.
 - ✓ Keep field guides handy for easy identification.
 - ✓ Do your best to develop a live and let live philosophy!
 - ✓ Know that your attitude is changing to one that reflects more tolerance to the wild creatures we share Muskoka with.
- ◆ **Share your property safely:**
 - ✓ Take note of snakes basking in open areas such as trails, rock outcrops, and grassy natural areas on your property.
 - ✓ When moving ground cover, be aware that a snake could be hiding in the brush.
 - ✓ Keep your eyes open while cutting grass, and if possible cut after 11 a.m. because the snakes may bask until this time.
 - ✓ Snakes could be out at night, so keep a flashlight with you while out in the dark.
 - ✓ Wear proper footwear, especially at night.
 - ✓ Excess brush from pruning can be left in a pile for snakes to use as cover at the end of your property, away from the house or cottage.
 - ✓ Be aware of your pets. Strange behaviour could mean they are harassing a snake.
 - ✓ Teach your family and friends about snakes and what to do if they find a massasauga.
- ◆ **See a snake?** Submit your sighting to the Natural Heritage Information Centre at nhic.mnr.gov.on.ca/MNR/nhic/species/species_report.cfm.



If you must move a snake, be sure to move it to a safe area of your property or other appropriate area away from roads. Never relocate a snake more than 250 metres from where you found it.

1. Wear rubber boots and long pants to ensure your safety while you focus on the snake. You are in a safety zone if you stay 1 m away from the snake.
2. Clear the area of interested onlookers to reduce distractions. Remain calm. If things do not look right or go wrong, back away, re-assess the situation, and start again. If the snake is about to escape or move into brush, leave it alone and allow it to retreat or escape.
3. Tip a garbage bin on its side, and use a broom, rake or shovel to position the bin near the snake.
4. Gently guide or herd the snake into the bin, being careful not to get too close and not to push the snake.
5. When the snake is at the bottom of the container use the broom, rake or shovel to tip the bin up and secure the lid with tape. Never leave the bin in direct sunlight, since this heat will dangerously overheat the snake.
6. Carefully bring the snake to its new location. Place the bin on its side and either gently slide the snake out or allow the snake to leave on its own with the bin on its side. It will seek safety in vegetation or rocks.
7. Never try to handle or tease the snake, which is the sort of behaviour that causes most bites.

Learn more. Check out the Species at Risk section on the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources website at www.mnr.gov.on.ca.