



EASTERN MASSASAUGA RATTLESNAKE
Sistrurus catenatus catenatus

FACT SHEET

Distribution: The eastern massasauga rattlesnake is a unique and fascinating Ontario reptile. It is the province's only rattlesnake, and one of just three members of the pit viper family in all of Canada. Ontario is home to 16 other snake species. Today, the massasauga inhabits just four areas in the province: eastern Georgian Bay area, the Bruce Peninsula, the Wainfleet bog (in the Niagara peninsula), and the Ojibway Prairie Complex in Windsor.

Habitat: Found in mixed forests, wetlands, marshes, swamps, fens, bogs and tall grass prairie.

Temperament: The massasauga is a rather shy snake, which would prefer to avoid humans. They will often hide from view to avoid being detected. It may rattle its tail to warn of its presence rather than striking.

Description: The massasauga's body is stout, in contrast to most of Ontario's snakes, which are quite slender. This is a small ground coloured snake, which is covered with dark blotches. The head is relatively wide, with a white stripe and three black stripes extending back from the face toward the neck. It is the only Ontario snake to have vertical pupils. At the end of its tail is the most notable feature, the blunt rattle. Composed of horny segments that produce a buzzing sound when the tail is vibrated, the rattle gains a new segment each time the snake sheds. The rattle has varying numbers of segments and it can be a key feature in identifying the snake, unless the rattle has broken off or the snake is young, in which case only a small button may be visible.

Length: Adult: 47 – 76 cm.

Venom: The massasauga's venom consists of toxic proteins and digestive enzymes that kill prey and begin to break down the tissue for easy digestion. The venom is produced in glands located on each side of the snake's head. During envenomation, the venom travels from the glands into small delivery ducts and through the fangs into the prey animal.

Reproduction: Most eastern massasauga rattlesnakes in Ontario mate in early summer. Females release a pheromone (chemical signal) to attract mates. After mating, the couples separate. Pregnant females eat little, feeding off their fat stores to support developing embryos.

Membranous (thin tissue) eggs are incubated internally and the young are delivered live following a gestation period of two to four months. Six to twenty young, approximately 20 cm long, are born.

Life span: About 18 years in the wild.

Wild Diet: Like most vipers, the Massasauga has a heat sensitive pit, which allows it to detect warm-blooded prey even in the dark. Eats small mammals such as mice, also small birds, other snakes and amphibians.

Status: The federal Species at Risk Act, and the provincial Endangered Species Act have designated the eastern massasauga rattlesnake as a **Threatened species**. This designation **legally protects** the massasauga from being harassed, captured, killed, bought, or sold. A violation of either Act can result in a maximum fine of \$250,000 and/or imprisonment for up to one year. A violation for commercial purposes increases the penalty to a maximum fine of \$1,000,000.

SNAKE SAFETY TIPS:

1. Learn to identify Ontario snakes, and to distinguish the eastern massasauga rattlesnake from other snakes that resemble it. Children can also be taught to identify the massasauga;
2. Wear protective footwear (such as hiking boots that cover the ankles) and long, loose fitting pants, especially when hiking in open rocky areas or places where vision may be obscured, such as in long grass or at night;
3. DO NOT pick up snakes or other wild animals. This act is the most common cause of bites;
4. Do not harass, chase or threaten a snake. This act is the second most common cause of bites. Most importantly, never kill a massasauga rattlesnake, which is unnecessary, dangerous, and illegal due to its protected status;
5. Always watch where you are putting your feet and hands. Poke around with a stick before reaching into brush, under rocks, or into dark places where snakes may be hiding;
6. If you hear a rattlesnake, STAY CALM! Stop walking, and then determine the snake's location. Slowly move away from the snake and give it room to also move away;
7. Keep pets on leashes; curious pets at large are more often the victims of snakebites than people.

If you come across a snake, the best advice is to enjoy the unique encounter but observe it from a safe distance and try not to disturb the snake.