

Harmless snake scares homeowners

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Wait! Don't kill that snake! It's NOT a rattler.

Vermont herpetologist Jim Andrews of Salisbury has gotten a raft of questions this year from people who have seen banded snakes -- sometimes coiled and rattling. Is there death waiting in my backyard? they want to know.

Nope.

Those are milk snakes, every one of them, and they are as harmless as the family cat.

The Eastern timber rattlesnake, Vermont's only poisonous reptile, is confined to a few areas of western Rutland County. Milk snakes are common denizens of barnyards and gardens, where they eat mice and help keep down the rodent population.

"They have this bluff behavior that scares people. If you push this guy far enough he'll coil and shake his tail, and time after time people are convinced it's a rattler," Andrews said.

That was Lindsay Harris' first thought last month.

Harris, a Hinesburg dairy farmer, was carrying a 50-pound salt block out to a field when she nearly stepped on a shape slithering through the grass.

"I had to jump over it, I was so close," she recalled last week. "It coiled up and rattled its tail. I thought, 'What on Earth?' A small part of me wanted to throw the salt block on it."

She thought better of the instinct. Instead Harris, who once worked as an ecologist, stood still and looked closely at the snake's markings. Then she went straight to her home computer to try to identify what she'd seen.

She encountered Andrews' Web site, www.vtherpatlas.org. After examining the photos there, she still was unsure what she'd seen. So like dozens of other snake-spotters, she filled out an online form to report the snake and ask what it was.

* Green Mountain

Those observation forms, filed by dozens of curious landowners and citizen-scientists, are helping Andrews to compile more and more detailed maps of the distribution of Vermont's 11 snake species.

He can say with growing confidence, for example, where rattlesnakes won't be found, and that the North American racer snake is confined to southeastern Vermont. Not many species have been reported from the cold Northeast Kingdom, but rat snakes, once thought to live only in Rutland County have been reported by sharp-eyed observers in northern Addison County.

Andrews said he is not sure why he's receiving more inquiries about milk snakes. Probably not because they are becoming more common, he said. A more likely explanation is Google.

"People see a snake, they go online and stumble across our Web site," he said.

'A little scary'

That's exactly what Walter and Evelyn Pruiksmas of Rochester did last month.

"I'm not a snake lover," Evelyn Pruiksmas confessed, so when she spotted three red-banded snakes coiled in her garden wall, "it was a little scary."

Her husband photographed the snakes and sent the pictures to Andrews, who reassured them they had milk snakes in the yard.

"Ordinarily people jump out of their skins when they see them, but we're getting kind of used to them," Walter Pruiksmas said. "They do have a pattern that looks like a rattlesnake if you are not knowledgeable about snakes, which we are not."

Down in North Bennington, Michael Keane was playing badminton on the lawn recently with his 5-year-old grandson when the child looked down and saw a tiny milk snake. Keane first thought it might be a baby copperhead. He captured the snake and sent photos to Andrews for identification, then he and the child returned the snake to the woods. (There are no copperheads in Vermont).

Rattlesnake in Bolton?

Unlike rattlesnakes, milk snakes have smooth scales. Their backs are patterned with reddish-brown blotches and their heads are marked with a distinctive white Y shape.

They lack rattles, although they will shake their tails to mimic the sound.

"As part of the show, they'll coil and strike from that position. But the snake is going to be six, eight, 10 feet from you when it does that, and its strike will reach about 15 inches. The snake knows it can't reach you -- it's bluffing," Andrews said.

Milk snakes are Vermont's second or third most common snake, he said, behind the garter snake and the reclusive red-bellied snake.

Nevertheless, most people are unfamiliar with milk snakes. Rattlesnakes, on the other hand, are engrained in the public consciousness. Andrews remembers getting a call from a woman in the Waterbury-Bolton area who was convinced there was a rattlesnake in her outdoor trash can. He read off a list of rattlesnake markings and she confirmed that her snake had each of them.

Andrews got in his car -- a rattlesnake as far north as Bolton would be quite a find.

"It was a milk snake. It didn't have a rattle, but when I had asked her questions she gave answers that were consistent with a rattlesnake because her brain was convinced that's what she had," he said.

Milk snakes may have gotten their name from an old wives' tale that they suck milk from cows. The myth likely arose because milk snakes will follow their prey, mice, into dairy barns.

Harris' encounter with the milk snake is one that she won't soon forget.

"I was pretty spooked," the Hinesburg farmer said. Once she learned more about milk snakes she had a different reaction. "I found they are constrictors and hang around barns and eat rodents -- so, great!"

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Milk snake

* LATIN NAME: *Lampropeltis triangulum*

* COMMON NAMES: Milk snake, spotted adder, checkered adder

* APPEARANCE: Two to 3 feet long, smooth scales. Back covered with reddish-brown blotches outlined in black and darkening with age. Head marked with a white "Y" (complete or broken). Underside has a white-and-black checkerboard pattern.

* POISONOUS? No. Can rattle its tail, leading to misidentification as a rattlesnake.

* HABITAT: Old fields, old buildings, stone walls and ledges. Widespread at lower elevations in Vermont.

* STATUS: Common in Vermont.

* MYTH: Milk snakes do not suck milk from cows, as rural legend would have it. They inhabit barns to feed on rodents.

Source: Vermont Reptile and Amphibian Atlas: www.vtherpatlas.org

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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