

Groups join forces to save Vermont rattlesnakes



Written by

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FAIR HAVEN — Scientists appealed for public help Tuesday on behalf of an unlikely species: the venomous timber rattlesnakes of western Rutland County.

The Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department, the Nature Conservancy and the Orianna Society, a national reptile conservation group, announced a two-year study of the endangered snakes to determine how many remain in Vermont, the extent of their habitat and the travel corridors they use to forage, mate and reproduce.

“Rattlesnakes are a treasure. They are a beautiful animal,” wildlife biologist Kiley Briggs told an audience of about 60 people who gathered Tuesday night in Fair Haven for a meeting about the snakes, and the study. “It would be an absolute tragedy to lose these animals.”

Vermont herpetologist Jim Andrews, another partner in the study, said Vermont represents the extreme northern end of the rattlesnakes’ range. Until 1971, the state

paid a bounty for people to kill the snakes. In an extreme turnabout of attitude, 16 years later Vermont added timber rattlers to the state endangered-species list and made it illegal to kill or harass them.

Although the snakes might once have been found as far north as Milton in the Champlain Valley, they now are confined to a warm pocket of Rutland County where rocky ledges provide denning and basking sites.

The rattlers have a dangerous reputation, and many people fear them, but such fears are overblown, Andrews said.

“They are a docile snake,” he said. “They are not aggressive as long as you don’t mess with them.”

Briggs will spend the spring searching for rattlers. A veterinarian will implant radio transmitters the size of cigarette butts in up to six male snakes so Briggs can track them across the landscape. Briggs will tape transmitters to other snakes, collect public

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reports of sightings and do field surveys to search for new populations.

Timber rattlesnakes congregate in underground dens for the winter, and several of those sites are known. But less is known about where the snakes range during the summer. Identifying their routes and the key habitats where they lie in wait for small mammals will allow targeted conservation efforts.

The Nature Conservancy has sent letters to about 200 Rutland County landowners, seeking permission to follow snakes across their land.

In the past, some landowners saw the snakes as dangerous pests to be killed if they are spotted. A new program offers free "rattlesnake removal" to any landowner uncomfortable with the presence of the creatures.

The scientists thought they might face hostile questions from worried residents, but that did not happen. Instead, the audience asked for more details about the rattlesnakes' habits and biology.

Paul Jardine of Fair Haven said after the two-hour meeting that a number of the snakes lived on property where he used to live.

"I'd come home and find two of them in the driveway," he said. "I just left them alone. Watching a rattlesnake is kind of like watching grass grow."

Until last fall, there had not been a

rattlesnake bite in Vermont in 50 years. A Rutland County case last year involved someone who improperly handled a snake, Andrews said.

He added that many of the reported rattlesnake sightings in Vermont are misidentifications. Most often, people mistake milksnakes for rattlers, he said, because the non-venomous milksnake often will coil and shake its tail as if it were a rattlesnake.

Although rattlesnakes are not aggressive, he said no one should try to handle one. Sightings can be reported to The Nature Conservancy's West Haven office at 265-8645.

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