A PRAIRIE RATTLESNAKE DRINKING WATER!

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The importance of water to rattlesnakes has been a matter of some difference of opinion. Researchers have found that most rattlesnakes in captivity drink occasionally when water is available. However, this is only after prolonged periods, during which time the snakes have become accustomed to their new surroundings and life style. Although it is believed that Prairie Rattlesnakes (*Crotalus viridis viridis*) seek out water immediately after emergence from their overwintering dens because of dehydration, actual documentation of this is rare or non-existent.

In the spring of 1983, I had set out to determine how many Prairie Rattlesnakes overwintered in dens located 2.7 km south of the city limits of Lethbridge, Alberta. Live capture traps were set up at the entrances of four known active Prairie Rattlesnake dens. In total, six prairie rattlesnakes were captured over a 20 day period. Each rattlesnake was tagged with a visual metallic disc and released within 2 hours of capture except the 2 largest rattlesnakes (a male and female) which were kept in a cage until radio transmitters could be implanted in them. The cage, constructed of glass and wire fly screening, was kept outdoors and a small dish of water was kept in it at all times. Nineteen days passed between the day of capture and the day of implantation of the radio transmitters. Every 3 days during that time, one live Deer Mouse was fed to each snake. On the seventh day, the female rattlesnake was observed with her snout just barely touching the water surface in the water dish (Fig. 1). A pulsating movement was evident in her throat as the lower jaw opened and closed very slightly. Her tongue was never extended. After 2 minutes, 23 seconds she moved away from the dish. The lower level of the water in the dish was conclusive proof that she had drunk. She was not observed drinking again and the male was never observed drinking.

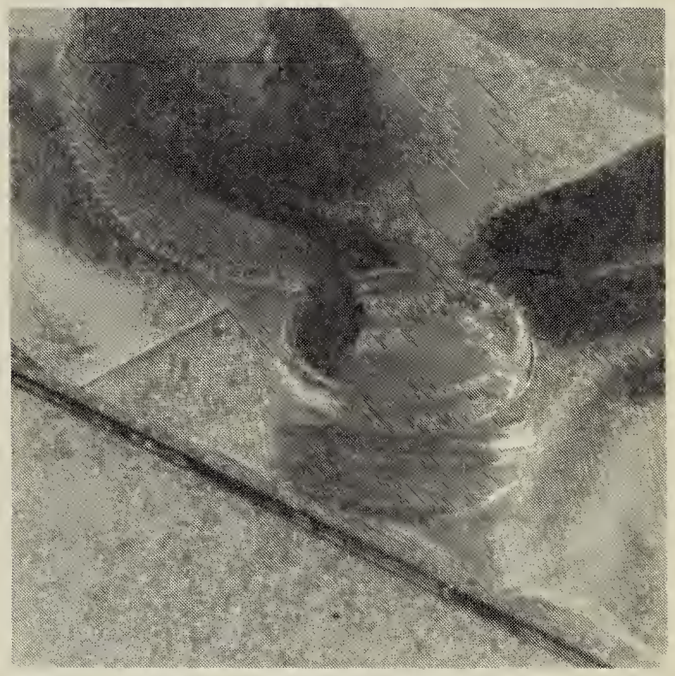

Figure 1. *M. Stark*

Prairie rattlesnakes are accustomed to dry conditions. The closest water source to the four dens is the Oldman River, a straight line distance of 550 m. From information gathered on movement over the summer of 1983, the furthest distance travelled from a den was 375 m. This implies that Prairie Rattlesnakes are largely dependent on prey for moisture requirements, although it has been suggested that perhaps they obtain moisture from water on the surface of rocks or

from puddles after a rain, or from dew on vegetation. I have never observed this.

Apparently the body fluids of the two mice consumed were insufficient in terms of moisture content to satisfy this size of rattlesnake (weight 641.5 gm, length 98 cm). Therefore, it would appear that after emergence from overwintering dens, if a sufficient amount of food (i.e. rodents, ground-nesting birds) is not quickly consumed by Prairie Rattlesnakes, they may seek out water to compensate for dehydration during the overwintering period.

A WESTERN RECORD FOR THE PLAINS HOGNOSE SNAKE IN MANITOBA

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On 25 September 1983 I received a telephone call from Tom Sandy of the Oak Lake Indian Reserve, 4.8 km (3 mi.) north of Pipestone, Manitoba, about a snake two girls had killed the day before. He said it was definitely not a garter snake and asked whether I was interested in seeing and identifying it.

My wife and I whipped out to the reserve, got directions and sped to the spot where the reptile still lay, decapitated and almost decaudated (sans tail to the uninitiated). Immediate sight confirmed my suspicion: it was a Plains Hognose Snake, about 51 cm (20 in.) long. The location was NE 3-8-26 WPM in Manitoba, approximately 7.5 km (4.5 mi.) north of PTH 2 and a few hundred yards west of Pipestone Creek.

I collected the remains, put them "on ice" and reported the find to Dr. William Preston, Curator of Reptiles, Amphibians and Fishes, Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature. He confirmed my identification. There was no doubt it was *Heterodon nasicus* and the location of the find was the westernmost record in Manitoba.

According to Dr. Preston, "it is quite possible that populations of these snakes were isolated by agriculture, but at the northern limit of their range, as here in Manitoba, the distribution would tend to be spotty."

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Previous western records for this snake in Manitoba were 10 km (6.2 mi.) west of Lauder, and at Oak Lake.[1] [2] The sighting near Lauder was 25 km (15.5 mi.) south and 6.5 km (4 mi.) east of the location reported by Braddell. Oak Lake is a community 14.5 km (9 mi.) north and 20 km (12.5 mi.) east of the new record.

[1] PRESTON, W.B. 1982. The amphibians and reptiles of Manitoba. Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature. 128 pp.

[2] SCOTT, V.H. 1970. The Western Hognose Snake. Zoolog 11(1):15-19.

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