

Snake on the Loose

My first continuing full time GT2 park warden job began in Georgian Bay Islands National Park in 1981, where myself, my spouse, and two children were posted to a warden station on Beausoleil Island. One of the wardens I had the pleasure of working with was Don Rose. If I recall correctly, he was the brother of Monty Rose, a park warden of some "fame" in the western parks. Don had a very interesting way of conducting warden patrols, and a wry sense of humour that kept the staff smiling. One never knew whether he was serious when he rushed out of the office with a 30-30 Winchester at a radio call of a dog loose on the island, or whether he had popped the boogie wheels off his skidoo along the trail just so he didn't have to complete a long cold snowmobile patrol.

One of our more high profile resource management projects was a capture/tag/recapture program related to the endangered Massasauga rattlesnake. The work entailed dumping the snake out of a metal holding can onto the office floor, pinning the snakes' head to the floor with a snake hook, working your fingers along the snakes' neck and holding the head firmly (but not too firmly!), and with the other hand holding the body to control movement. Another warden then proceeded to sew colour-coded plastic disks onto the rattle using a large needle and mono fishing line. It was very stressful work, as sometimes your fingers lost feeling, and you had to toss the snake quickly onto the floor, wait for feeling to come back, and start the process all over again. Most times the snake evacuated its' bowels on your uniform pants or the floor, releasing the most vile smelling liquid, and making the task of holding the snake even more difficult. Monday mornings were particularly stressful, as there may be a large number of snakes captured over the busy weekend, waiting to be processed and released by the unlucky wardens on the schedule that morning. We all had our methods of "preparation" for the task, and Don's was usually a pot of black coffee and half a pack of cigarettes before starting. Don was completely freaked out by snakes, but he never backed away from this unpleasant duty.

Once all the snakes were processed, they had to be loaded into the patrol boat and released near their capture site. Most times we just nudged the bow on to the shoreline rock, and dumped the snake overboard. For some reason, most never swam to shore, but followed the boat as it backed away from shore. This always prompted a few choice words from Don's mouth, and quick work on the throttle.

On one of these trips, we received a radio call to pick up a rattlesnake in one of the boat-access only campsites. The camper had left the snake in a small garbage bag nailed to a tree near the dock. Don stopped at the dock, and I ran up and grabbed the snake. I tied an overhand knot in the plastic bag, and tossed it down into a storage area beside my seat. Don quickly got the 215 Grew IO up on plane, and we sped up the main channel towards Frying Pan Bay. I suddenly felt something on my leg, looked down, and saw the rattlesnake slithering across my thigh towards my crotch. I screamed, jumped up, and ran to the stern, dumping the snake onto the floor beside Don. Don, realizing what had happened, joined me beside the engine cover in record time. We suddenly realized we were in a dangerous situation - Don's patrol boat was circling at high speed in a busy boating channel with a rattlesnake on the floor

between us and the throttle. Park visitors and local cottagers seeing a bright blue and orange park boat out of control with two park wardens huddled at the stern must have got the gossip lines humming! We eventually used a boat hook to yank the throttle back and get the boat under control, but could not find the snake anywhere around the seats. Don slowly motored his way back to the island maintenance dock, and all the while I was carefully looking for the snake in every conceivable hiding spot. We delivered the boat to the park mechanic – and we never did find out what happened to that particular snake