

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

An Account of the Rattlesnake¹

By the Honourable Paul Dudley, Esq; F.R.S.

The Rattlesnake is reckoned by the *Ab-origines*, to be the most terrible of all Snakes, and the Master of the Serpent-kind; that which causes their Terror, without doubt, is their mortal Venom, and the Ensign of it is their Rattle; and it is most certain, that both Men and Beasts are more afraid of them, than of other Snakes; and while the common Snake avoids a Man, this will never turn out of the Way.

There are three Sorts, or Kinds, of this Snake, and distinguished by their Colour, *viz.* a yellowish Green, a deep Ash Colour, and a black Sattin.

The Eye of this Creature has something so singular and terrible, that there is no looking stedfastly on him; one is apt, almost, to think they are possess by some Demon.

A Rattlesnake creeps with his Head close to the Ground, and is very slow in moving, so that a Man may easily get out of his Way: This ought to be remarked as an Instance of the Goodness of God, who preserves Man and Beast. His leaping and jumping to do Mischief, is no more than extending, or uncoiling himself; for they don't remove their whole Body, as other Creatures do, when they leap; so that a Man is in no Danger of them, if his Distance be more than their Length; neither can they do any Harm when they are in their ordinary Motion, until they first coil and then extend, or uncoil themselves, but they both are done in a Moment's Time.

When a Rattlesnake rests, or sleeps, he is coiled, and they are observed to be exceeding sleepy.

Our People at first took the Noise this Creature makes, to be owing to some little Bones, or hard loose Kernels lodged in their Tails; but soon discovered their Mistake, and found the Tail to be compos'd of Joints, that lap over one another, somewhat like a Lobster's tail; and the striking them one upon another, forms that Noise, which is so terrible to Man and Beast. The fiercest Noise is observ'd to be in clear fair Weather, for when 'tis rainy, they make none at all; for which Reason, the *Indians* don't care to travel in the Woods, in a Time of Rain, for fear of being among these Snakes before they are aware. One other Circumstance of their rattling has been observ'd, to wit, that if a single Snake be surprized and rattles, and there happen to be others near him, they all take the Alarm, and rattle in like manner.

I dare not answer for the Truth of every Story I have heard, of their charming, or Power of Fascination; but yet I am abundantly satisfied from many Witnesses, both *English* and *Indian*, that a Rattlesnake will charm both Squirrels and Birds from a Tree into his Mouth. A Man of undoubted Probity sometime since told me, that as he was in the Woods, he observ'd a Squirrel in great Distress, dancing from one Bough to another, and making a lamentable Noise, till at last he came down the Tree, and ran behind a

¹ Reprinted from the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, Vol. 32 (1722–1723), pp. 292–295. Note that we have updated the font, but spelling, punctuation, and italics are as in the original.



TOM TYNNG

Dudley described three color phases, this individual is "black Sattin," a pattern rarely seen in populations other than in the northeastern United States.



TOM TYNING

This snake is what Dudley described as "a deep Ash Colour"; the third color phase ("a yellowish Green") is quite rare today, Tom Tynning, who studies Timber Rattlesnakes in Massachusetts, has heard of only two examples in the past 30 years.

Log: The Person going to see what was become of him, spied a great Snake, that had swallow'd him.

And I am the rather confirmed in the Relation, because my own Brother, being in the Woods, opened one of these Snakes, and found two strip'd Squirrels in his belly, and both of them Head foremost. When they charm, they make a hoarse Noise with their Mouths, and a soft Rattle with their Tails, the Eye at the same time fixed on the Prey.

Their general Food consists of Toads, Frogs, Crickets, Grasshoppers, and other Insects, but principally of Ground Mice; and the Rattlesnake again serves for Food to Bears, and even our Hogs will eat them without Harm.

They are viviparous, and bring forth generally about twelve, and in the Month of *June*. A Friend of mine in the Country, being desirous to discover the Nature and Manner of the Generation of the Rattlesnake, gave me the following Account, *viz.* About the middle of *May*, the Time when the Rattlesnakes fist come abroad, he took and opened one of them, and in the *Matrix* found twelve small Globes, as big as a common Marble, in Colour like the Yolk of an Egg; in three or four Days more, he took and opened another, and then plainly perceived a white Speck in the Centre of the yellow Globe; in three or four Days more, he dissected a third, and discovered the Head of a Snake; and in a few Days after that, three Quarters of a Snake was formed, and lying round in a Coil. In the latter End of *June*, he kill'd an old one, and took out perfect live Snakes of six Inches long. In *September*, when the old ones take their Young in, and carry them to their Dens, they are not quite a Foot long. They couple in *August*, and are then most dangerous.

I cannot say, what other Serpents, or poysonous Creatures, may do, but I am satisfied the Rattlesnake does not traject his Poyson; and that unless the Skin be first broke, or an Incision made with his Teeth, his Venom can do no Harm; for my Friend assured me, that he had made an Experiment of it in this manner: He took the Breech of his Gun, and set it upon four or five of them, and after they had bit it, and left several Drops of their Poyson, he with his Hand wiped it off without any Harm.

Our People have several Remedies for the Sting of a Rattlesnake; among other, that which is much made use of, is a Root they call Blood-

root, I suppose so named, from the Colour of the Root, and the Juice, which is red like Blood. It grows in great Abundance in our Woods; they bruise the Root, and bind it above the Place that is bit, to prevent the Poison's going farther, at the same Time scarifying the Place affected; some of the Root is also boiled, and the Person poisoned drinks the Water.

They are generally from three to five Feet long, and do not commonly exceed twenty Rattles; and yet I have it attested by a Man of Credit, that he killed a Rattlesnake, some Years since, that had between seventy and eighty Rattles, with a sprinkling of grey Hairs, like Bristles, over his Body; he was full five Foot and an half long, and as big as the Calf of a Man's Leg.

They shed, or throw off their Skins every Year, sometime in the Month of *June*, and turn it inside out when they throw it off. It has also been observed, that the Skin covers not only the Body, but the Head and Eyes.

They generally den among the Rocks in great Numbers together; the Time of their retiring is about the middle of *September*, and they don't come abroad till the middle of *May*, when our Hunters watch them, as they come out a sunning, and kill them by hundreds.

Roxbury, New-England

Octob. 25. 1722.

Paul Dudley

Editor's Remarks

The historical piece reprinted in this issue is one of the oldest we have included, originating in "New-England" in 1722. The author was the grandson of one of the first Governors of the Massachusetts Colony, the son of the Governor of Massachusetts Bay. If the *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* are to be trusted, Dudley was admitted to Harvard College at the age of 11. He received his Master's degree in 1693, when he was 18. He went back to England, studied law, and came back to serve on the provincial superior court until his death, including a stint as Chief Justice from 1745–1751. The F.R.S. after the name stands for "Fellow of the Royal Society" (London), and as such he published quite a few papers in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, including "An Account of the Method of Making Sugar from the Juice of the Maple Tree in New England" and "A Description of the Moose-Deer in America."

Science has changed since Dudley's account was published. No modern biologist would suggest that their study organism is so "singular and terrible, that ... one is apt, almost, to think they are posset by some Demon." Nor is one likely to view as an "Instance of the Goodness of God" that the snake is slow-moving and "a Man may easily get out of his Way." The article includes some basic biology, much of it second-hand, and additional ethnographical information obtained from "the Indians." Dudley was quite credulous by today's standards. "I am abundantly satisfied from many Witnesses, both English and Indian, that a Rattlesnake will charm both Squirrels and Birds from a Tree into his Mouth." Interestingly, I heard an almost identical tale told in Costa Rica not that long ago, about boas. If you happen to be caught in this spell — apparently it works in people, too — please remember that passing a metal implement between the snake and the victim will break the trance (in Central America, machetes seem to be the preferred implement). However, some things do not change. In Dudley's time, "our Hunters watch [rattlesnakes], as they come out a sunning, and kill them by hundreds." Almost three hundred years later, springtime rattlesnake roundups still involve the slaughter of thousands of snakes, although evidence of negative effects on populations remains elusive and anecdotal.

Gad Perry