

This is the complete extract from the Journal of Captain Johnathan Carver describing the scaly inhabitants of **SNAKE HILL** in the mid 1700's.

We have footnoted his observations with a present day update on each of the four species he describes.

Many thanks to Jane Davies of the Fort Erie Historical Museum for finding this record in Ottawa and publishing her article in the August issue of "Snapshots".

Those who study local natural history will be intrigued and grateful to have this invaluable two hundred year old account of the herpefauna of Fort Erie. Our gratitude to Jane and the members of the Board.

J.E.K.
August 1992
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A
JOURNAL
OF THE
TRAVELS
OF
CAPTAIN JONATHAN CARVER
FROM
MICHILIMACKINAC
TO THE COUNTRY OF THE
NADDOUWESIE OR SIOX
FROM AUGUST THE 12TH 1766 TO AUGUST 30TH, 1767

About 20 miles from the falls of Niagara, upon the River of that name, I came to the east end of Lake Erie. On the entrance of this lake is a bar of rocks extending from the north side almost across the river. Only a small channel where vessels of sixty or eighty tons with the advantage of a strong wind and without being loaded. Fort Erie stands on the north side at the east end and is now commanded by Lt. Cardin with about 40 soldiers who assist in loading the vessel and forwarding the provisions for the troops at Detroit and Michellimackinac.

From Fort Glosser a small garrison, at little above the falls of Niagara, now without any except one or two to take care of the Kings Stores that yet remain here to Lake Erie there is a pretty good depth of water. Sufficient for to take up the vessels built at some of the islands near Fort Glosser into Lake Erie. The land about here is tolerable, good and well timbered.

Lake Erie is about 300 miles long, lying nearly east and is about 50 miles in breadth tis remark? able for having a very long and narrow point beginning near the middle or north side extending its course east southeast about 40 miles or better. The canoes which generally coast these lakes are carried over a garry place about 50 rods across within a little ways of the northern shore, this point is very sandy and produces abundance of scrubby small trees and vines, this lake has in many places for several miles together very high banks which makes it somewhat dangerous passing with canoes or battoes as tis common for sudden squalls to rise especially in spring and fall whereby many battoes and canoes loaded with goods and lives and lost in these lakes is a great plenty of fish and at some seasons of the year there is a great resort of fowl. The sand about here is very good. Suitably timber, a vast plenty of chestnut trees, oak, hickory, maple, cedar and fir. In the woods is abundance of game such as bear, deer, turkey, partridges and pigeons.

The land about Lake Erie is very good for settlements, its a very pleasant country and nothing can make it so disagreeable as the multiplicity of snakes of several sorts. The most numerous is the **WATER SNAKES** ¹ which th'o pretty common through all the settled provinces, yet are found no where in such numbers as at this place. They are frequently seen in the middle of the day lying coiled upon the leaves of water lilies which are near a foot broad and rest on the surface of the water and are so close to each other that in many places they cover the water for several acres together and on there I have seen such multitudes of these that the whole surface of the water for some distance appears quite black. These water snakes when grown are about as large in the middle as a mans ankle and are about two feet and half in length of a brown colour interspersed with row of spots of a yellowish shade about the bigness of an English shilling in the middle, lessioning towards each end in proportion with the different sizes of the snake, I never heard that this snake was ever esteemed poisonous and when ever people approach then they appear quite shy and run into the water. The **RATTLE SNAKES** ² here which are very numerous are not at all different from those in the provinces or other parts of America. However, as not all my readers may have seen a particular description of them, this snakes when grown to its common size is about four feet in length and about eight inches in circumference in the middle, tapering to the neck which is no longer than a mans middle finger, the head is wide on each side but not thicker than the neck perpendicular wise, in his upper and under jaws are small teeth. Something resembling those in a small fish but in the fore part of the upper jaw are two teeth much longer then the rest, very much like the claws of a cat and like those will either project in an erect posture when he is about to bite, which he does by letting fall his under jaw, or contract them under a thin sort of flimsy skin which nature seems to have provided. They bite not their food with these teeth, if they did it would prove as fatal to them as

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any other animal they have a small bag full of mortal venom which they emit at the same time that their teeth touches or enters what they bite; this I have frequently seen when I have Vexed them and made them bite at a rag fastened to the end of a stick. They emit their poison through a hollow place in their teeth, this is only seen when the tooth has been laid dry for some months. I have looked on purpose when they were first killed but could not see any such thing. Their poison is of a dirtyish green colour, from their middle to their tails it tapers to the bigness of a man's little finger where begins their rattles by pairs of a dry colour substance increasing one every year the first partly covering the second which seems loosely rivetted into the first, tho one of these is added every year yet the number they are found with gives no certainly of their age, for they frequently loose some of them, I have found them with fourteen which takes up about four inches in length (there appears to be two sorts of these snakes the one are commonly called the black, the other the yellow sort, the poison of the yellow sort is esteemed the most mortal but whether really so or not I cannot say, those of the black sort have from one end to the other rows of yellowish spot about the bigness of a shilling which a shade of a purpleish colour beautifully made, the yellow sort have spots in the same manner of a dark purple on one side of the spots which decreases to a yellow except the edges of the spots are entirely of a darkish cast each colour by changing its position to the light shades different, these are very beautiful (the rattle snake when he is disturbed immediately coils himself into a round heap with his head prominent in the middle with a few inches of his tail and rattles perpendicular which with a sort of a quick trembling notion he makes a noise which may with attention be heard more than a score rods this frequently is a sufficient warning to the uncoy traveller and he either kills or shuns then venomous reptile. The different seasons of the weather very such effect this snake and his bite is very venomous in the dog days but when but moderately warm the rattler appears harmless and will endeavour to get out of the way. (the poison of this snake is more or less

venomous not only to all human beings but to every sort of beasts (the hog only excepted this animal that live where rattle snakes are frequently found, eat them of choice and when bit will not regard it more than the bite of one of their own kind nay they will rather hunt after them for their food I flung a large old one for curiosity sake among a drove of hogs, each one strove for a bit as if it had been their natural food. I observed one who eat the head eagerly without being in the least effected if the head of the rattle snake be cut off in the forenoon tis common for life to remain in him till sun set their galls taken out and mixed with powdered chalk and made up into ball are sold to the apothecaries and are esteemed, very good and cooking in fever especially in children, tis observed that the rattle snake in the most docile of all serpents in winters the den in holes in rocks and remain thro that season in a state of inactivity and stupifaction. As to their food or whether they eat any thing during this time, is a matter of uncertainly as yet there is another snake about Lake Erie which I have never seen anywhere else these they are called the **HISSING SNAKE** ³ are about 20 inches in length speckled with small yellow and purple spots with some faint appearance of stripes of a yellow and purpleish colour. These snakes are about 3 inches in circumference, round in the middle, their way of emitting their poison is in this manner, when they are vexed they will flat their heads and necks for several inches, long and near two inches in breadth and at the same time make a sort of a hissing belching out a most unsavoury smell, which if a person at the leeward takes full in his breath is immediately taken into a decline which carrys him off in a few months. There is another snake about this lake that I have never yet seen any where else this appears to be something of the species of the **BLACK SNAKE** ⁴ and differs from them only by being somewhat larger and its belly of scarlet or red colour. I killed several which I measured about seven feet or upwards in

length and about 6 inches in circumference in the middle. I never heard that these were any ways poisonous.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) Here Captain Carver describes the (Northern) water snake, a non-venomous but combative species that frequents wetlands throughout Eastern North America. To have flourished in the numbers depicted here, these must have fed almost exclusively on the many varieties of small fish native to Lake Erie and the "Bay" at Snake Hill.

This snake may be found today in the creeks that flow into the Niagara River and is quite common in the Stevensville area.

It is distinct from its nearest relative the garter snake, by its heavy build and tendency to escape to water when encountered. If handled, a large water snake is capable of inflicting a painful bite from the lacerating curved teeth. Large water snakes of up to four feet have been sighted locally in recent years.

It is not related to the southern water moccasin or cotton mouth (venomous species).

- (2) Here Capt. Carver describes the **Timber Rattlesnake** in both its black and yellow phases. This species, once common throughout the Northeast is now extinct in Ontario. The last officially recorded individual reposes in a jar at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, tagged "*Crotalus Horridus*" -- Niagara Gorge 1941.

The Timber Rattler may still be found in isolated colonies in Southeastern New York and much of Pennsylvania. It belongs to the same genus as the **Diamondback** and its southern version, known throughout the cotton belt as the **Canebrake Rattler**, may reach six feet in length.

Captain Carver fails to mention in his journal anything of the smaller but equally venomous **Massasauga Rattlesnake** (*sistrurus Catenatus*) which still may be found in dwindling numbers in the Wainfleet Marsh. As recent as 1965, it was not uncommon to find these snakes within the Port Colborne and Welland city limits during dry periods in July or August.

The fact there is no mention of it, suggests the **Massasauga** was never native to the Fort Erie area. The **Massasauga** prefers peat bogs such as Wainfleet but is also common along the shores of Georgian Bay from Tobermory to Parry Sound. The largest specimen recorded locally was 37" (Forkes Road Welland 1960).

Although relatively small in comparison to other North American (Pit) vipers, the venom of the **Massasauga** is particularly toxic and has proven fatal in a few cases in Ontario.

Prompt intravenous administration of North American Polyvalent antivenin is essential for treatment of its bite. The Ministry of Health

stocks supplies of this serum at both Port Colborne and Welland hospitals and throughout its range in the Georgian Bay district.

In every case in Ontario in which fatality occurred, there had been either a misdiagnosis of snakebite or unavoidable delay in treatment due to distance or isolation of the victim.

There has never been a fatality locally. The Rattler should never be approached or handled. If encountered in the wild, it should be given the opportunity to escape unchallenged. Even bites treated promptly can develop into gangrene because of the haemotoxic factor in the venom. Small animals bitten by massasaugas often die in less than one minute. (ratio of body weight-victim to volume of venom injected)

- (3) Here Captain Carver describes the most interesting inhabitant of snake hill; the hissing snake, a.k.a., the Puff Adder or Sand Viper. Its real name is (Eastern) Hognose Snake.

Despite its fearsome appearance and behaviour, contrary to Captain Carver's observation, (poisonous breath) it is harmless. (This is one of the most enduring examples of serpent mythology). This snake, which is strikingly similar in size, shape and colouration to our Massasauga Rattler, was common in the Waverly Beach area and westward shoreline as recent as 1950. Locally, it is now restricted to the wooded preserves of a few exclusive Point Abino estates. (Hollaway Bay).

It may still be found in the Tilsonburg area (Tobacco Belt), Pinery Provincial Park on Lake Huron and the islands and shores of Georgian Bay.

- (4) Here Captain Carver describes the Black Rat snake, Ontario's largest snake. Protected as an endangered species, it is now found in numbers in Lanark and Leeds counties only (north east of Kingston) and on a few private islands in the St. Lawrence--1000 Islands region.

It is a powerful constrictor and predator of rodents and will climb high into trees to hunt birds. Individual specimens of 8 feet may still be found. The Queen's University biology department annually tracks these snakes by surgically implanting radio transmitters in their tails. This way they may be followed to their dens and protected from snake hunters who sell or trade them to collectors. The Black Rat snake is closely related to the Fox Snake, Ontario's other large constrictor (5-6 feet). Once common throughout the marsh lands of the shore of Lake Erie from Long Point to Pelee, there have been isolated reports of sightings of both the

Black Rat and Fox snakes in the Niagara
Penninsula in recent years suggesting both
species were once common in Southwestern
Ontario.