

Rattlesnake Roundup in Kansas: A Brief History

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Abstract

Organized hunting ("roundups") of rattlesnakes for commercial profit has occurred for 50 or more years in several states in the U.S. For a long period, such roundups went unnoticed by wildlife agencies, biologists, and herpetologists. In recent years, there has been increasing concern that such intense and largely unregulated hunting could have an adverse effect on wild populations of rattlesnakes. There have been few conclusive studies on the topic. The first organized rattlesnake roundup to occur in Kansas was held in September of 1992 in the small town of Sharon Springs, and it is the intent of this paper to outline a series of events which occurred in the first, formative years of the roundup. Prior to the introduction of rattlesnake roundups into Kansas, all native amphibians and reptiles were protected from commercial interests by state law. The first roundup had little economic benefit for the participants, as all carcasses were either given or thrown away. Before the second roundup (held less than a year later) the organizers of the roundup succeeded in changing

state wildlife laws to accommodate their economic interests. The objections and recommendations of the Kansas Department of Wildlife & Parks (KDWP), conservation organizations, and professional biologists were essentially ignored so that a select few might profit from commercial use of rattlesnakes. It became clear that economic gain for the roundup promoters and vendors held a higher priority than sound wildlife management. The legalized sale of rattlesnakes and their parts, including meat for human consumption, raised new concerns regarding meat inspection laws in Kansas. Shortly before the third roundup, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) informed the roundup organizers that their practice of selling uninspected meat was illegal. Nonetheless, the sponsors sold rattlesnake meat the following weekend. Clearly, the roundup organizers intended to violate the law as long as there was money to be made. The roundup organizers were never prosecuted and no fines were levied. Although a rattlesnake roundup has taken hold and continues to prosper in Kansas, it is clear that without the efforts of biologists and concerned citizens the situation would be much

worse. Many of the more malicious aspects of the roundup have been tempered as a direct result of the efforts of relatively few individuals and organizations.

Word travels fast in the Kansas Herpetological Society (KHS). All were astounded and appalled that the unthinkable was on the verge of occurring right here in our very own herpetologically enlightened state. It can't happen here. Bad things, you know, always happen somewhere else. Yet there, in giant black type on ugly electric yellow paper, was the announcement: "Kansas's First Ever Rattlesnake Roundup!" It was to be held in Sharon Springs, Kansas—spitting distance from Colorado—on Labor Day Weekend 1992. We were all too familiar with the broad-ranging destructiveness of rattlesnake roundups in other states: the unregulated taking of wild animals for commercial profit, the use of gasoline to flush snakes out of shelters, the neglect and abuse of captive animals, and the perpetuation of antisnake sentiment. This roundup was advertised as a fundraiser; a family oriented event with the added benefit of "controlling overpopulation" of rattlesnakes which, sponsors claimed,

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cause immeasurable damage to humans and domestic animals in western Kansas.

Hosting a rattlesnake roundup was not an idea that citizens of Sharon Springs conceived on their own. Members of the sponsoring organizations had friendly ties with James White, owner of the “Fangs and Rattlers Show” from Granbury, Texas. In fact, one woman from Sharon Springs served as a bridesmaid in White’s wedding—a wedding that took place in a snake pit. Sharon Springs was looking for a fund-raiser, and James White was looking for another gig. The snakes, they believed, were free for the taking. A rattlesnake roundup in Sharon Springs was the perfect solution. Herpetologists did not agree.

At the time, Kansas law prohibited the sale of any wild reptile or amphibian, including prairie rattlesnakes, and limited possession to five animals. The roundup sponsors did plan a few tricks to bypass these existing laws, such as giving away rattlesnake meat, provided that the recipient purchased a bun on which to eat it. Many herpetologists concerned about the rattlesnake roundups were confident that the state’s wildlife agency would not stand for such attempts to circumvent the law. Several of these herpetologists sent token letters of concern to various individuals and agencies, and returned responses ranged from reassurance to hostility. Kansas Herpetological Society (KHS) representatives made several vain attempts to educate roundup sponsors and to shape the event into something less destructive. Nonetheless, the roundup commenced as planned.

An estimated 2000 people

attended the roundup; among them were KHS members Henry and Virginia Fitch and Travis Taggart, who had been contracted by the Kansas Department of Wildlife & Parks (KDWP) to collect data on the size and reproductive condition of captured snakes. This data collection alone provided little information about the effects of the roundup. Other KHS members in attendance to observe and report on the activities of the roundup included Dr. David Edds of Empo-



One of the sideshow type tricks shown at the “Fangs and Rattler” show.

ria State University, Randall Reiserer, and David Reber of the University of Kansas. Several veterans of Oklahoma’s roundups were also in attendance, to help in the “snake pit” and to guide groups in search of prairie rattlesnakes. A total of 75 prairie rattlesnakes were turned in (Edds 1992), 18 of which were born at the roundup. All 75 were ultimately killed. The snake meat sales trick failed, and most of the meat was either given away or thrown away, as were all other snake parts. The roundup did earn a substantial amount of money, through assorted trinket vendors, snake products from other

states, food service, and tickets to the “Fangs and Rattlers Show,” direct from Granbury, Texas. The “Fangs and Rattlers Show” was typical roundup entertainment, the announcer cajoling the crowd while the pit crew performed daredevil tricks, most of which involved unnecessary rough treatment of the animals. Children were invited to pet loosely restrained rattlesnakes, and dangle inflated balloons into the pit in hopes of enticing a strike. Overall, a carnival-like atmosphere pervaded and, with current laws prohibiting the sale of wild caught prairie rattlesnakes, the snakes themselves were not the central money maker. Those of us in attendance at the roundup remained confident that the roundup organizers would lose interest and move on to something less destructive. The thought that existing laws could be legislated moot never crossed our minds.

Enter Sheila Frahm, Senate majority leader representing the Sharon Springs area. Senator Frahm began her political career as a member of the Sharon Springs local school board. Unknown to us, Senator Frahm had also attended the first roundup, even helping to weigh the snakes. Then, during the 1993 legislative session, she introduced a bill (Senate Bill 137) that, if passed, would not only allow the sale of prairie rattlesnakes, but would raise the limit from 5 to 30, and remove all management authority from the Department of Wildlife & Parks. Once again we thought: it can’t happen here. We all assumed that our enlightened legislature would never pass such an anticonservation bill. Still, KHS and numerous herpetologists provided testimony against the bill, as did the

Kansas Wildlife Federation, the Kansas Audubon Council, the Topeka Zoo, the Sedgwick County Zoological Society, the Kansas Chapter of the Sierra Club, and even the Kansas Department of Wildlife & Parks (KDWP). Apparently politics, not prudence, drove the issue, as the bill passed with little opposition. There was some success for conservationists; the final bill was altered to place regulation of the roundup back into the hands of KDWP.

Before KDWP could enact regulations, a second roundup was held in the spring of 1993, less than one month after Senate Bill 137 became law. A springtime roundup was recommended by representatives of Oklahoma and Texas roundups. This, combined with the generous bag limit allowed by the legislature, resulted in over 170 snakes being taken—more than double the number of the first roundup (Western Times 1993). Senator Frahm and her daughter Chrissy were in attendance and, in recognition of her “heroic” efforts, Frahm was presented with her very own snake bucket and tongs.

Shortly after the second roundup, KDWP began the long process of developing regulations for commercial use of prairie rattlesnakes. Initially, KDWP asked Oklahoma officials for advice on the issue, in spite of the fact that Oklahoma roundups target a different (and much more prolific) species, the western diamondback. Roundup organizers lobbied KDWP, asking for no possession limit, a year-round season, and no restrictions on the open area. KHS (1993) president Dr. David Edds attended virtually ev-

ery meeting of the Wildlife & Parks Commission, recommending that KDWP reset the possession limit at 5 snakes, limit the open area to only the counties surrounding Sharon Springs, and limit the open season to the roundup weekend. Many others addressed the Commission as well, advocating moderation in light of the glaring lack of sound biological information. In spite of their testimony, each draft of the regulations proved more lenient. Furthermore, when herpetologists at-



Another one of the sideshow type tricks shown at the “Fangs and Rattler” show.

tended, the issue was often removed from the meeting agenda, as if the Commission were attempting to push regulations through without input from the scientific community. Again, politics drove the issue.

It was decided by the KHS that their position statement must be reinforced using the available scientific literature and published, for permanent record and to assist policymakers. Thus, a position paper was written, totaling 11 pages and 43 references. The paper included recommendations for regulating the roundup—recommendations aimed at promoting sportsmanship and a sustainable yield of *Crotalus viridis*.

A copy of the paper was provided to each member of the Wildlife & Parks Commission, as well as to the Department Secretary, Theodore Ensley. At the final ruling in January of 1994, conservationists were extremely disappointed. The lenient draft regulations passed with few modifications. The only successes were lowering the possession limit from 30 to 20, limiting the open season to a 30 day period prior to the roundup, and limiting the open area to the western third of the state (approximately one half of the prairie rattlesnake’s range in Kansas). One major loophole remained: the sponsoring organizations were not subject to a possession limit. Thus, one person could conceivably catch their limit, sell their catch to the roundup sponsors, then head back for more, effectively circumventing the existing possession limit. KDWP defended the regulations as a compromise between interest groups.

Clearly, arguments based on the biology of the prairie rattlesnake and sound wildlife management were not taken seriously. The bottom line was money, and a way to touch the bankbooks of the roundup sponsors was badly needed if their plans were to be altered. KHS discovered that the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) has strict regulations pertaining to the butchering and sale of meat. Essentially, both the butchering facility and the meat itself must be inspected and passed by KDHE before any meat can be sold. A letter was sent by KHS to KDHE immediately, along with an explanation of the past butchering process and an advertising flyer for the upcoming roundup. KDHE repre-



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Prairie rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridus*) which was taken at a roundup in 1992 (it can be assumed that it was slaughtered—possibly fashioned into an item such as a hatband).

sentatives contacted the roundup organizers, explained meat processing and sales laws, and informed them of the penalties for violating those laws.

The third roundup was held in May of 1994. The take totaled over 300 animals, again doubling the previous year's take (Fitch 1994). KDWP's research indicated most of these snakes had been stockpiled for extended periods, despite the open season having been only one month. Virtually every snake exhibited dermal rotting, lesions, abrasions, lacerations, or paralysis, and most were severely emaciated (Taggart 1994). Some were dead, presumably having been crushed under the accumulated mass of snakes in small containers. Owing to the poor condition and small size of the prairie rattlesnakes, and the tediousness of butchering small, tough-skinned snakes, the roundup sponsors purchased a number

of western diamondback rattlesnakes to butcher and sell. The butchering facility, located in a livestock wash area at the local fairgrounds, had been cleaned up a bit (members of the audience were no longer invited to ceremoniously behead snakes with a rusted hatchet, for example); however, they continued to illegally butcher and sell uninspected meat. The violations were reported to KDHE. In spite of prior warnings, the roundup sponsors pleaded ignorance and received only a letter of reprimand—no fine was levied. KDHE officials did state, however, that a second offense would be prosecuted.

The Kansas Herpetological Society has always encouraged conservation of amphibians and reptiles in Kansas. Laws protecting wildlife from commercialization had provided a strong foundation for these efforts, but the advent of the rattlesnake roundup

has weakened that foundation considerably. It will be an arduous task to regain what we once had, but it can be done. Efforts to date have resulted in many significant improvements, and have buffered many of the more negative aspects of the roundup. Some of the more malicious aspects of the first roundup have been diminished or eliminated altogether. For example, at the first roundup the butcher shop offered spectators a chance to swing the hatchet. This was done ceremoniously, and was portrayed as insidious revenge on the rattlesnake. By the third roundup, the "ceremony" was gone, and the butchering was nothing more and nothing less than butchering. Direct negative effects on children have also been reduced slightly. At the first roundup, children were invited to participate (for a fee, of course) in the torment of rattlesnakes via "balloon fishing". Children waved

inflated balloons over the heads of rattlesnakes while the pit attendant stomped at the snakes in an effort to elicit a strike. The "balloon fishing" activity has now been eliminated. Furthermore, the roundup sponsors no longer advertise the event as a means of "controlling overpopulation" of rattlesnakes. Nor do they continually deride the animals as the scourge of the prairie. Overall, these small improvements add up to an event that is much less pernicious to young minds than it might have been. However, there have been some less-than-honest attempts to pacify the conservation community. For the third roundup, the sponsors had designated several areas totaling 88 square miles as "rattlesnake preserves" where hunting of rattlesnakes was not allowed. Further investigation revealed that these areas were nothing more than land for which the owners had denied permission to trespass. Thus, the roundup sponsors did not in fact designate "rattlesnake preserves," but simply capitalized on inaccessible land as a public relations gimmick.

Some headway has been made with respect to regulating the roundup. Although a 20 snake limit is still far too high, and a 30 day season far too long, it is likely that, without the efforts of many herpetologists and conservationists, the sponsors would have been granted their request of no possession limit and a 12 month season. In addition, the entire state of Kansas would likely have been opened to the roundup, despite the fact that prairie rattlesnakes only live in the western half. Having no limit on where rattlesnakes could be collected throughout the state

could have placed other species, including the state-protected timber rattlesnake, at risk. Much has been accomplished, yet there is still much to be done.

Several changes have occurred since the third roundup. Senator Frahm is now Lieutenant Governor Frahm. Because she has lost her powerful position in the legislature, she has much less ability to persuade other legislators, and less power also with the KDWP. In addition, she is now subject to more intense scrutiny than in the past, and thus she may be less apt to promote anticonservation measures. Also, there is some question about the location of the fourth roundup, as it is rumored it will move to the nearby town of Colby, Kansas, the hometown of Sheila Frahm. Whether these changes are good or bad is largely up to the conservation community, and how it acts concerning them. There are several trump cards yet to be played, but in the long run it is the grassroots effort that will keep the snakes in the grass—where they belong.

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David L. Reber earned a BS in Systematics and Ecology from the University of Kansas in 1991. He then pursued graduate work at the University of Kansas in the School of Education, and in 1995 received a Kansas Teaching Certificate for middle and secondary level science. During his graduate work, David was voted president-elect of the Kansas Herpetological Society (KHS), of which he had been a member since 1980. During his three years on the KHS executive council, he has focused the society's efforts on conservation issues including, but not limited to, rattlesnake roundups. He now teaches at the Natural Heritage Center, Inc., where he is also associate director, and at Raintree Elementary School in Lawrence, Kansas.

In 1985, he saw a photograph of a young field biologist with four bullsnakes in her lap; he later married her. Alison L. Reber earned a bachelor's degree in Environmental Studies from the University of Kansas in 1994. She has been an active member of KHS, is coauthor of the KHS Position Paper Regarding Rattlesnake Roundups, and has coordinated many efforts to reduce the impact of commercial taking of prairie rattlesnakes in Kansas. Alison has provided hundreds of children with hands-on natural history experiences, often emphasizing herpetology. In early 1995, she founded the Natural Heritage Center, Inc. (NHC), a nonprofit children's science education center in Lawrence, Kansas, which she now directs. She also teaches at Raintree Montessori School in Lawrence. Alison is a firm believer in the power of education. Both authors hope that early, positive experiences with nature will help people make wiser decisions regarding our natural resources.

For further reading about rattlesnake roundups the authors suggest the Kansas Herpetological Society Position Paper Regarding Rattlesnake Roundups, (Kansas Herpetological Society Newsletter, No. 96: 9-20, 1994), The Sweetwater Rattlesnake Roundup: A Case Study in Environmental Ethics, by Jack Weir (Conservation Biology, Volume 6, Number 20), and Driving Out the Dread Serpent, by Ted Williams (Audubon, September 1990).

