

U of Ottawa

Tracking snakes gives Queen's students close up look at nature

By Marco Smits
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Laura Bjorgan reaches in to a cloth bag at the Queen's Biological Station lab on Opinicon Lake near Chaffeys Lock. The bag, labeled Split Rail Fence, is from a table with five other similar-looking bags. Barb's Barn and Red Gate Trail are some of the other labels.

She pulls her hand out of the bag and is holding a five-foot long black rat snake. The snake doesn't appear to mind.

Her colleague, and fellow biology student Jeff Row, scans the snake with an electronic device and concludes that this specific one has been caught before.

The scanner registers the snake's identity by recognizing a small device called pit-tag. Researchers inserted the tag, the size of a grain of rice, below the skin.

Black rat snakes, Canada's largest snakes, are harmless and non-venomous. They can grow up to eight feet and are excellent tree climbers.

The Black Rat Snake is recognized as threatened under the Species at Risk Act (SARA), which was proclaimed in June 2003 by the Canadian government for the protection of species at risk in Canada.

While common in the United States, the only thriving population of black rat snakes in Canada is found in the Frontenac Axis.

Bjorgan and Row are two out of approximately 60 students, who are currently stationed at the Queens Biological Station. Queen's University purchased 65 acres of land on Lake Opinicon in 1945 and now owns more than 5000 acres.

During its history a huge variety of research has taken place and insects, bats, moths, bass, turtles and many other species continue to be studied.

"The idea of studying ecology and behaviour was not all that defined at the time the station was founded," says Queens Biological Station manager Frank Phelan.

"It was set up with the help of war veterans and was designed to retrain them. It's similar to the



Laura Bjorgan holds a black rat snake while fellow Queen's biology student Jeff Row scans it with an electronic device at the Queen's Biological Station lab on Opinicon Lake near Chaffeys Lock. Photo by Marco Smits

for the future, and that it was important to secure access to this type of research in the long term," says Phelan.

Currently, the students work out of a new building, completed in 1999. The new building, built in the same location as the original lodge, was designed with modern day students and researchers in mind.

The entire biological station provides overnight facilities for approximately 70 students at a time.

The only remaining item from the original lodge is the large bell at the front entrance. It serves as an alarm clock for many of the resident students and is also rung to announce lunch and dinner.

"When that bell goes I know I better get out of bed," says Bjorgan. "Everybody's life revolves around it," she says as she heads out to release the snakes. They are released close to where they were found after being measured and scanned.

"Let's release the one at Barb's barn," says Bjorgan. "It is funny how we refer to some people on a daily basis who we have never met, just because there are often snakes caught in the vicinity of their land.

The cooperation

Bjorgan get out of the Ford Explorer. The car is filled with the smell of musk, a scent of the snake to make itself unappealing to predators.

Behind them, fellow researchers are watching the behaviour of tree frogs in a field of tall grass dotted with birdhouses.

The snake is released and Bjorgan brings out receiver equipment to track down other snakes she has been following over the past years.

Each snake caught by the researchers receives a pit-tag for identification, and some carry a transmitter.

The transmitters are inserted under the snakes' skin during a minor operation. Approximately 30, both black rat and milk snakes, received a transmitter during the past two years.

Bjorgan holds the

antenna in the air and quickly finds one of her snakes and she makes some notes.

Her research on critical black rat snake habitat and the behaviours of juvenile snakes will be incorporated into a recovery plan. The plan is a governmental requirement for Species at Risk Act.

Since the Queens Biological station was founded black rat snake research has been part of its program. The capturing of more than 3600 has been recorded and over 1000 snakes have been tagged.

The Queen's Biological Station, is holding an open day on July 4 between noon and 3 p.m. to give the general public the opportunity to learn more about snake research and other projects. For directions to the facilities visit <http://biology.queensu.ca/~qubs>.



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