

Rattlesnakes on Mount Everett

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January 13, 2000

There are records of rattlesnakes on Mount Everett and anecdotal references to a rattlesnake den there.

Although I have not been searching for information on rattlesnakes, I have found a number of sources while researching other topics.

Picturesque Berkshire, published in 1893, stated:

Mount Everett can be easily reached on foot from the town [of Mount Washington]. One of the pastimes in summer of some of the sporting fraternity of Mount Washington is to catch rattlesnakes along the mountain side where they have dens, and the oil is sold as a remedy for deafness.¹

In his 1948 description of Mount Everett, A. Kenneth Simpson described an encounter with a rattlesnake at the upper parking lot: "At the log cabin on a rocky ledge overlooking the Housatonic Valley, I once vied with a determined rattlesnake for its occupancy."²

On the front cover of the July 8, 1953 edition of the *Berkshire Evening Eagle* was a photograph of Mervin Whitbeck holding a rattlesnake at the end of a pole with the following caption:

RATTLER AT BAY: Mervin Whitbeck of Mount Washington, who catches rattlesnakes for fun, captured this one and three others on Mount Everett recently in company with Bill Pollack, district wildlife manager; Alvah W. Sanborn, director of the Pleasant Valley Sanctuary in Lenox; Selectman Gilbert Isaacson and Collins (Pete) Miles of Copake, N.Y. Two of the rattlers were killed and the other two were donated to the Sanctuary, where they are now on exhibit in double-paned safety-glass pens. They replace two Sanctuary rattlers that died last year, one of them at the hands of an aggressive mouse. Although copperheads have been unofficially reported in this area on several occasions, there is no authentic record of any venomous snakes except rattlers in Berkshire County.³

¹ Charles F. Warner, ed., *Picturesque Berkshire: Part II – South* (Northampton, MA: Picturesque Publishing Company, 1983), p. 81.

² A. Kenneth Simpson, "With What the Hills Are Clothed" in *The Berkshires: The Purple Hills* by Roderick Peattie, ed. (New York, NY: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1948), p. 50.

³ *Berkshire Evening Eagle*, 8 July 1953, p. 1.

Christopher Rand wrote a book of his year spent living in a cabin near Bear Mountain. He had this to say about rattlesnakes on Mount Everett:

I saw no rattlesnakes either, but they were there. One, with ten rattles, was even found basking, toward the summer's end, on the Appalachian Trail...In July I was told that the rattlesnakes, being shy, had been driven far from the Trail by the hikers, but that was hardly true in this case. A young boy discovered the snake right in the Trail itself, in the stretch where the latter crosses Mount Everett in Massachusetts. And I know of two other rattlers, at least, that were found on the plateau last summer.⁴

In a recent email, herpatologist Thomas Tynning said: "There's no question in my mind that there's a den on Everett; just where it is needs to be determined..." He plans to study the Mount Everett rattlesnakes this summer.⁵

In a letter to DEM Commissioner Peter Webber, Frank Lowenstein of The Nature Conservancy said: "...The Nature Conservancy has conducted extensive studies of the timber rattlesnake on and around Mount Everett."⁶

James Whitbeck, son and grandson of locally famous rattlesnake hunters, said there is a rattlesnake den on Mount Everett. He described it as being on the SSE slope.⁷

Lucile Van Deusen and her sister Doris Van Deusen Southergill encountered a rattlesnake on the Appalachian Trail at the south end of the Mount Everett summit while blueberry picking several decades ago.⁸ That would have been near the location Whitbeck described.

Townpeople have numerous stories of rattlesnakes on Mount Everett.

The records of several individuals and institutions might have information about Mount Everett rattlesnakes and den locations.

Raymond L. Ditmars, a curator of the New York Zoological Society (now called the Bronx Zoo), hunted rattlesnakes at Black Rock and other south Taconic mountains for 29 years.⁹ He fervently believed in the value of filming his scientific endeavors and amassed a quarter-million feet of film, stored in the Bronx Zoo vault.¹⁰

Dr. Ditmars's colleague, Elwin R. Sanborn, Chief of the Department of Publications and Photography at the New York Zoological Society, had an extensive collection of scientific photographs.¹¹

⁴ Christopher Rand, *The Changing Landscape: Salisbury, Connecticut* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 91.

⁵ Email from Thomas Tynning, 7 December 1999.

⁶ Letter to DEM Commissioner Peter Webber from Frank Lowenstein of The Nature Conservancy, 4 October 1999.

⁷ Interview with James Whitbeck and Lucile Van Deusen, Mount Washington, MA, 9 January 2000.

⁸ Interview with James Whitbeck and Lucile Van Deusen, Mount Washington, MA, 9 January 2000.

⁹ Morgan Bulkeley, "Rattle Tales" *The Berkshire Eagle*, 22 July 1965.

¹⁰ Raymond L. Ditmars, *Confessions of a Scientist* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1934), p. 140.

¹¹ Ditmars, p. 223.

Dr. Ditmars's hunting partners were Sheffield residents Harold Roys who lived near the base of Black Rock and Rolls Smith, whom he described as "a keen naturalist [who] would rather hunt rattlers than fish for trout."¹² The Sheffield Historical Society may have some of their records.

Dr. Ditmars's predecessor as the Zoological Society's chief curator, Charles E. Snyder, also hunted rattlesnakes in the area. In 1929, he died of a rattlesnake bite in New York's Ramapo Mountains.¹³

Walter E. Brent, a naturalist from Jamaica Plain in eastern Massachusetts, was apparently knowledgeable about rattlesnakes in the western part of the state. He spoke about local rattlesnakes at a 1903 lecture to the Sandisfield Rod and Gun Club.¹⁴

Rattlesnake hunters Isaac (Ike) Whitbeck and his son Mervin Whitbeck (both long deceased) apparently did not maintain records of their catches. However, the elder Whitbeck caught rattlesnakes for zoos and museums, such as the Museum of Natural History in Springfield.¹⁵ He also exhibited his rattlers at the annual Great Barrington fair.¹⁶

Mervin Whitbeck hunted with Kevin McDermott,¹⁷ whose son, Court McDermott, recently retired from Bousquet Ski Area.

Bartholomew's Cobble of the Trustees of Reservations and Pleasant Valley Sanctuary of the Massachusetts Audubon Society received rattlesnakes from the southern Taconics.¹⁸

In the 1950s, Charles Munson, Forest Fire Observer at the Washburn Mountain fire tower on the western ridgeline of the southern Taconics, was considered one of the best rattlesnake men in New York State.¹⁹

The Berkshire County Commissioners' office has a collection of historical county records.

The Sheffield Historical Society, Berkshire County Historical Society, and the Berkshire School may also have records of rattlesnakes on Mount Everett.

Historical societies and libraries in Salisbury CT and Copake and Hillsdale NY may have records.

Archives and microfilm from the Springfield Union, Berkshire Courier, Berkshire Eagle and its predecessors, and other regional newspapers should be searched, as well.

¹² Ditmars, p. 84.

¹³ Raymond J. Librizzi, "A Rattlesnake Is a Gentleman," *Berkshire Eagle*, n.d.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ David J. Malcolm, "Champion Rattlesnake Catcher," *The Springfield Union*, 6 August 1922.

¹⁶ Raymond J. Librizzi, "A Rattlesnake Is a Gentleman," *Berkshire Eagle*, n.d.

¹⁷ Interview with James Whitbeck and Lucile Van Deusen, Mount Washington MA, 9 January 2000.

¹⁸ *Berkshire Evening Eagle*, 8 July 1953, p. 1.

¹⁹ A. T. Shorey, "We Have Rattlesnakes," *The New York State Conservationist*, February-March 1953, p. 27.