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Rounding Up the Rattlers

By CAMERON MCWHIRTER
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Georgia Hamlet's Rattlesnake Festival Faces Prospect of Becoming Endangered Event

WHIGHAM, Ga.—On Saturday, this hamlet in the pine woods and cotton fields of southwest Georgia hosted its 53rd annual "rattlesnake roundup," a festival that drew thousands of visitors to gawk at some of the largest and most venomous rattlers in the world.

A small group of hunters competed for prizes awarded for the largest Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake captured—the rattler featured at the festival—and for the most rattlesnakes captured. Most of the snakes will be sold, killed and their skins turned into boots, belts and wallets.

Such contests were once common in parts of the rural South. But today, they're snakebit. Whigham's roundup is one of only two still held in the Southeast U.S. where the snakes are killed afterward. In the Western U.S., only 15 roundups of the Western Diamondback—a smaller, less venomous snake—remain.

The events are sparking a debate between those who embrace the tradition and those who want it to end.

Edward Linsmier for The Wall Street Journal
Levaughn Bond demonstrates his father's snare on a stuffed snake at a home near Whigham, Ga., last week

The Center for Biological Diversity, a Tucson, Ariz.-based environmental nonprofit group that opposes the events, has applied for federal protection for the rattlesnake, which would likely prohibit roundups.

In the center's view, the Eastern Diamondback is an endangered species and is vital to the ecosystem, according to Collette Adkins Giese, a center attorney heading the effort.

"This is the year 2013, you just can't be doing this anymore," Ms. Giese says. She said the roundups should be converted to "non-lethal" festivals, in which snakes are not killed.

"Most of the people are coming for the mini-doughnuts and the rides, not the snakes. You don't need to be killing the rattlesnakes at the end to have fun."

Harold Mitchell, an ecologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who is overseeing a review of the center's application for an official designation to "endangered" status, says it's too early to say what his recommendation will be.

Snake activists acknowledge that public response so far to their push moves to end the roundups has been less than enthusiastic in parts of the South.

"The bottom line is people hate snakes and they could care less what happens to them," says Jim Ries, a suburban Atlanta dad and unemployed fitness trainer whose two children are gathering signatures to end the Whigham roundup.

Roundup supporters say the events don't hurt overall snake populations and say Eastern Diamondbacks are thriving in large sections of the Southeast U.S. It's the roundups that face extinction, they argue, because younger hunters aren't taking up the dangerous practice of capturing rattlesnakes.

"Roundups are on the way out," says Ken Darnell, an Alabama businessman who collects venom to sell to pharmaceutical companies and is a supporter of the Whigham roundup. Videogames are a lot more appealing to young men than trudging through brambles to catch venomous snakes, he says.

Attendance at the Whigham roundup has dropped from as many as 40,000 people decades ago to around 15,000 in recent years, according to Barry Strickland, a member of the Whigham Community Club that sponsors the roundup. The number of snakes captured has dropped from an all-time high of 610 in 1995 to a record low of 37 last year, according to roundup records.

John Lodge, a rattlesnake hunter and community club secretary, said this year's roundup brought in 56 snakes, but he said crowds were down and not enough hunting groups participated to give out a fifth-place prize for the most snakes.

Last year, Claxton, Ga., near Savannah, ended its roundup and switched to a wildlife festival, in part from pressure from environmentalists.

"There were only four or five guys in our club who still hunted snakes anymore," says Bruce Purcell, president of the group that organizes that festival. "It had kind of fizzled out."

The Georgia Department of Natural Resources, charged with identifying and protecting endangered species in the state, says the rattlesnake population in the Southeast has declined, but it also isn't convinced the snake is endangered. Fewer Eastern Diamondbacks are seen these days in some parts of the state but "that doesn't mean they are declining to the point of needing federal listing," says John Jensen, a biologist and snake expert with the state agency.

Rattlesnake hunting requires walking for hours in woods to spy holes where rattlesnakes nest. Hunters stick hoses down the holes, hoping to poke a snake and hear it rattle, or "sing," as hunters call it. They then try to dig the snakes out or might return on a warmer day when snakes could be lying out in the sun.

In Whigham, people say rattlesnakes aren't scarce. They see them slithering across roads and in backyards. When farmers bring in their crops, snakes spill out of the harvesting machines.

"You can't live around here and not see a rattlesnake," says Alice Bond, whose late father-in-law, George Bond, still holds the record for largest rattlesnake ever caught in the roundup: 15 pounds, two ounces in 1976.

Levaughn Bond, 66 years old, Alice's husband, says he's too old to hunt rattlesnakes anymore. On a recent weekday at the office of his septic-tank business, Mr. Bond got out his father's old hunting equipment: aluminum shin guards to block strikes from a coiled snake and a PVC pipe with a steel loop to grab snakes by the neck.

"You have to hunt like the devil to catch snakes," says Mr. Bond, who carries a revolver in his waistband to kill any rattlesnakes that he encounters.

Locals say the town needs the event. From 2000 to 2010, the population dropped from 631 to 471. Storefronts sit empty.

"We have nothing in this town, just one red light and a few shops," says Fay Young, who owns an antiques store on Broad Avenue, Whigham's main thoroughfare.

"The roundup brings in some people and we get some recognition," she says