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## Claxton rattlesnake roundup gets a makeover

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Eastern diamondback rattlesnakes like this one in Liberty County will no longer be rounded up for the Claxton festival. Photo courtesy Dirk Stevenson

By Mary Landers

The Claxton Rattlesnake Roundup will no longer be rounding up wild rattlesnakes. The quirky, 45-year-old annual event is reinventing itself as a wildlife festival.

“As far as the public is concerned, we’ll still have plenty of snakes to come look at,” said Bruce Purcell, president of the Evans County Wildlife Club, which sponsors the event. “We’re going to have rattlesnakes. We simply have stopped buying and selling snakes.”

The event, which began after a local boy survived a serious rattlesnake bite, has typically bought and sold snakes for competition and prizes. Last year, seven hunters brought in about 100 snakes, which were then sold to an out-of-state buyer, Purcell said.

But there’s long been outside pressure for the roundup to change its ways, including visits to the festival and club from Georgia Department of Natural Resources officials.

“I think it’s the culmination of years and years of pressure from lots of groups that got them thinking,” said John Jensen, DNR senior wildlife biologist and the unofficial state herpetologist. “But really it was leadership of the Evans County Wildlife Club that stuck his neck out to say ‘do it.’”

State law provides no protection for venomous snakes, but Georgia wildlife officials were concerned about how the rattlesnakes were captured and handled and the message the roundup sent, Jensen said.

“For Eastern diamondbacks, the biggest threat is habitat loss,” Jensen said. “But then you tack on that they’re killed by anybody who sees them and harvested for roundups and harvested for skins. Another main thing is these events contribute to passing along to younger people the idea that wildlife should be treated this way. People should recognize they’re potentially dangerous, but they’re part of the ecosystem.”

Pulling snakes from the wild poses dangers to other animals in part because rattlesnakes use the burrows of gopher tortoises, a threatened species, as dens. One snake hunting technique is to pour gasoline into the burrow to drive the snake out, Jensen said. That makes for lots of collateral damage.

‘Something like 300 different animals can use gopher tortoise burrows,’ Jensen said. And while Georgia law prohibits putting toxic chemicals in wildlife dens, venomous snakes are exempt.

DNR is working with the club to provide enough snakes for the March 10-11 festival, Jensen said.

He’s capturing some to establish a captive source of 40-50 snakes that Zoo Atlanta has agreed to house. But the wildlife club’s decision came sooner than DNR anticipated, so this year he’s having to scramble a little. The Edisto Island Serpentarium stepped up to help with 20 diamondback and 20-30 canebrake rattlesnakes.

Among the private groups that had lobbied the Roundup to change was the Center for Biological Diversity.

‘It’s a huge relief they’ve switched over to a festival instead of the killing contest they’ve had in the past,’ said Collette Adkins Giese, the center’s attorney.

As with rattlesnakes themselves, the roundup tradition has been dwindling around the country. The town of Fitzgerald, Ga., morphed its long-standing rattlesnake roundup into a festival celebrating the town’s wild Burmese chickens. With Claxton’s change, Whigman is the only remaining rattlesnake roundup in Georgia, Giese said.

For Claxton, most of the festival’s other elements remain — a parade, a pageant, a footrace, a two-day arts and crafts show, live musical entertainment, Purcell said.

‘We want to shift gears from a rattlesnake roundup where everybody came to see rattlesnakes to a wildlife festival where we’re promoting wildlife and educating people about wildlife and the conservation of wildlife,’ Purcell said. ‘I think we can open this event up, and the possibilities for our promoting and protecting wildlife are endless.’

But, he added, rattlesnakes will remain the stars of the show.