



# THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

## FACT SHEET

## Rattlesnake Roundups



A Western Diamondback Rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*). Diamondbacks are often hunted for rattlesnake roundups (Credit: USFWS).

### Burrow Micro-habitats

Hundreds of species, including rattlesnakes, utilize the critical burrow micro-habitats created by animals such as Gopher tortoises (*Gopherus polyphemus*), prairie dogs (*Cynomys spp.*), and armadillos (*Cingulata spp.*). These burrows provide protection from predators and aridness, as well as a safe nesting habitat for numerous dependent species.<sup>3,4</sup> These important habitats can be destroyed by the gassing and digging methods of hunting rattlesnakes.

Rattlesnake roundups have been a popular practice in the Midwest and Southern U.S. since the 1930s. Rattlesnake roundups are local events in which snakes are harvested and counted as part of a competition between participants. Collected rattlesnakes are then typically sold for their meat and/or skin.<sup>2</sup>

Roundups were originally created to promote the elimination of local venomous snakes in an effort to limit the threat of snake bites on humans and cattle, now they persist as traditional community events in towns from Texas to Pennsylvania. The largest roundup in Sweetwater, Texas draws in over 35,000 spectators each year.<sup>1</sup>

### Common Hunting Methods

Two traditional methods of rattlesnake hunting are gassing and digging. These methods have the potential to negatively impact the ecological habitats of rattlesnakes, particularly burrow micro-habitats.

#### Gassing

Gassing is a historically used method of hunting rattlesnakes. Hunters pour gasoline or ammonia into a burrow or other enclosed area. The fumes push the snakes out into the open, making capture more likely.<sup>5</sup> Rattlesnakes and other wildlife are heavily reliant on burrows for nesting and gassing is known to render these sites uninhabitable for years.<sup>6</sup>

#### Digging

Hunters may excavate a burrow to collect snakes. This process may destroy the burrow, making it unavailable as nesting and/or protective habitat for several species.<sup>2</sup>

Gassing and digging techniques impact several species of wildlife that have been documented using or otherwise occupying these burrow micro-habitats.<sup>2,7,8</sup> Some of these burrow-dependent species are federally protected, such as the Gopher tortoise, Eastern indigo snake (*Drymarchon corais couperi*),<sup>9</sup> and Burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*).<sup>6,10</sup>

## Modification of hunting methods

Twenty-nine states have banned the use of noxious substances to collect or harass nongame wildlife, including snakes, in an effort to prohibit gassing.

Texas, home to the largest rattlesnake roundup, proposed legislation to ban gassing in 2014. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department supports the ban and noted the effects gassing has on threatened and endangered species that rely on burrow habitats.<sup>11, 12</sup>

Some methods of hunting rattlesnakes do not negatively impact surrounding ecosystems. For example taking of rattlesnakes by hand, snake hook, or snake catcher enable snakes to be captured without damaging critical burrows or other habitats.<sup>13</sup>



An educator at the Claxton Rattlesnake and Wildlife Festival uses a snake hook to show a rattlesnake to the crowd. Several roundups are transitioning from traditional population reduction focus to an educational focus (Credit: John B. Jensen, Georgia Department of Natural Resources ).

## Repurposing roundups

Roundups are changing to a more educational purpose. For example, the Evans County Wildlife Club in Georgia renamed their Rattlesnake Roundup to the Claxton Rattlesnake and Wildlife Festival to show their renewed focus on conservation. The festival acknowledges conservation efforts by groups like the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and the Georgia Southern University Wildlife Center and showcases captive rattlesnakes in an educational setting.<sup>15</sup>

Some rattlesnake roundups, like the one in Noxen, Pennsylvania, do not harvest the gathered snakes, instead they use their efforts to contribute to



A gopher tortoise entering its burrow. These burrows are used by several species including rattlesnakes. Gassing and digging to collect rattlesnakes may destroy these habitats (Credit: USFWS).

snake conservation. The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission is at the roundup each year to conduct research and tag each snake before releasing it back into the wild, providing valuable data on the rattlesnake population trends.<sup>16</sup>

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