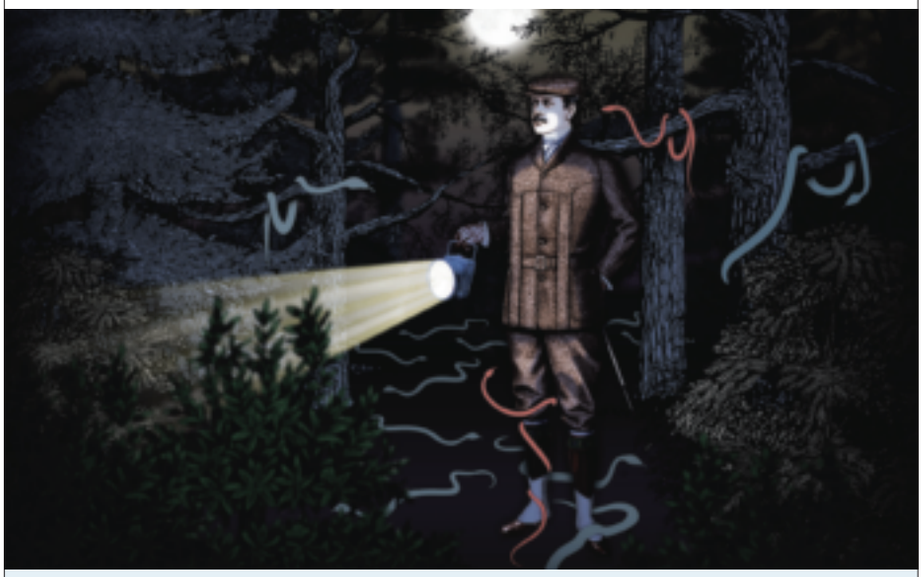

SNAKE IN THE GRASS

BY MADELEINE ENO

Since the beginning of time, snakes have gotten bad press.

In fact, according to self-described "Snake Man" Rick Roth, "There's no animal about which there's more misinformation."

Thankfully, there are people like Roth, who is devoted to the reptile. The director of the Cape Ann Vernal Pond Team and a carpenter by day, Roth frequently tours with 25 of his 80 snakes in the "Snakes of New England and the World" educational show. His mission is to set the record straight.

For instance, did you know that venomous snakes make up about 20 percent of snake species worldwide? But in the Northeast only two of the region's 14 species can inject a hemotoxin, which destroys red blood cells and can cause organ and tissue damage. They are the timber rattlesnake and the northern copperhead. The chance of hikers bumping into either one on the trail is low.

Both are rare, reclusive, and confined to isolated areas. In Massachusetts, they are on the endangered list and might be found in the Blue Hills and in the western part of the state, Roth says.

If you do spot one, show some respect and you should be fine. Roth has been obsessed with snakes for more than 50 years and has never been bitten by a venomous one. The best way to get bitten is to pick up or otherwise mess with the snake. That's why most occurrences of snakebite, he says, involve "young men and alcohol." Only a handful of snakebites are reported in the Northeast each year.

A bite from either of our venomous locals would not be likely to kill you, but it could cause some serious damage. On the slim chance that you are bitten, wash the bite, apply a pressure wrap, and stay as calm as possible while getting to the nearest hospital. As AMC's Director of Outdoor Leadership Training Aaron Gorban says, "Ideally the patient is carried to slow the venom's spread, but that's not always an option." Bottom line: Seek medical care immediately.

When hikers in the Northeast spot a snake, they obviously want to know if it's dangerous. Unfortunately, Roth says, even with guidebook in hand, "most people are really bad at identifying snakes."

It might be a garter snake—usually dark brown or green with a yellow stripe down its back. Or you may spy a Northern water snake in lakes and ponds—dark and up to 5 feet long. Around farms and barns, it could be an eastern milk snake, which has black-outlined "saddles" of brown to brick-red on a white or gray body. (Milk snakes do not suck on cows' udders, contrary to popular mythology.)

Our venom-toting species aren't easy to ID either. The stocky-bodied copperhead's coloring can resemble that of the milk snake, and the chevron-and-band pattern of the timber rattlesnake can range from black to yellow. (Luckily, it does have the tell-tale rattle, which is simply dead skin, a segment added each time the snake sheds.)

"It's fun to observe snakes," Roth says. "They're just as interesting as birds." But no matter what kind you think you're seeing, follow his advice: "If you're not a snake man, don't touch it."

ILLUSTRATION: S.H. LEE