Massasauga Populations in Northern Missouri

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Massasauga distribution from surrounding states and our historic research suggest these snakes were widely distributed in wetter areas throughout the prairie area of northern Missouri. This is in contrast to the distribution based solely on voucher specimens which are found mainly from counties along the Missouri, Mississippi, and Grand Rivers. The distribution of these vouchers has been used to suggest that massasauga were originally restricted to the floodplains of these major rivers. We searched (using the key word rattlesnake) all county histories and digitized newspapers of Missouri State Historical Society in the northern prairie region which matches the range for the prairie. We also searched six selected newspapers found on microfilm for rattlesnake accounts. So far we have found 213 rattlesnake accounts. In a few cases massasauga were named (usually by the name prairie rattlesnake), but more often we had to use habitat, size, or other characteristics to try and determine the type of rattlesnake. Still, in 86 accounts there was not enough information to determine the type of rattlesnake since the timber rattlesnake is found throughout this range. From these historic accounts, we found 7 counties that have rattlesnake evidence consistent with massasauga populations. Four of these counties (Monroe, Pettis, DeKalb, and Caldwell) are counties not in the floodplain of the major rivers. Sixteen other counties had accounts that suggested massasauga populations, but we only have weaker evidence for these counties. In many cases the accounts simply called the snakes “rattlesnakes” and did not give enough evidence from length or habitat to be able to be sure of the type of rattlesnake. Nine of these sixteen are scattered throughout northern Missouri away from the floodplains of the major rivers.

The historical research, at least at this level of searching digitized records, did not detect all of the massasauga populations. In fact, we found good historic evidence for massasauga in only two of the fifteen counties that had vouchers. However, four more of the fifteen vouchered counties have some accounts that could be interpreted as massasauga. We also found twelve counties with good evidence for timber rattlesnakes that have no timber museum vouchers. Our historic evidence suggests that massasauga were widely distributed throughout the prairie crayfish range in suitable habitat in northern Missouri and more historical research (settler’s diaries, non-digitized newspapers) should uncover more historic populations.

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