



Large numbers of red-sided garter snakes are easy to find at the Fort Livingstone historic site near Pelly, Sask., in early to mid-May. | ROBIN AND ARLENE KARPAN PHOTOS

TRAVEL | SASKATCHEWAN

Go snake-seeing at historic Saskatchewan site

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

We hear them before seeing them, a strange swooshing sound among the low shrubs.

Closer to the riverbank, we see snakes everywhere, slithering through the grass and among the bushes as if they are on a mission or looking for something. They are.

It's mating season for red-sided garter snakes, and they certainly aren't shy about it. On the lip of the riverbank, a hundred or more are entwined in a complex-looking mating ball.

But this is nothing compared to what we see just over the slope of the bank, where thousands upon thou-

sands writhe in a thick, tangled, undulating heap of serpents.

Snakes seem to be pouring out of the hibernaculum, which are the burrows in the side of the riverbank where they spend the winter. More and more join in the bedlam, slowly rolling down the hill in a knotted mass. It's hard to imagine how they become untangled, but somehow they do.

The orgy goes on and on, with several different concentrations, sometimes growing in size and then suddenly breaking into smaller units. If we stand in one spot too long, the constantly moving reptiles may slither over our feet.

We come here knowing there will be a lot of snakes. That wasn't the case almost 140 years ago when some of the first Europeans in the area unknowingly built one of the most important institutions in Western Canada right on top of the snake hibernaculum.

When the North West Mounted Police made its historic march west in 1874, it established its first post at Fort Livingstone on the banks of the Swan River. Located just north of present-day Pelly, Sask., the post became Canada's first Mounted Police headquarters. For two years, this was also the site of the first capital of the Northwest Territories before moving to Battleford in 1878. In its heyday, Fort Livingstone governed more than half the land mass of Canada.

Early residents of the fort were in for quite a surprise in the spring when

snakes started streaming out of the hibernaculum en masse as the weather warmed up. Journals make many references to snakes being everywhere, getting into everything and creating havoc. Mounties held snake catching contests to help pass the time.

It's usually the wildlife that loses out when people and wildlife clash, but not this time. Fort Livingstone is long gone. Though the fort's former location is officially a National Historic Site, all that's left is a simple historic marker and a few plaques describing its former glory. The snakes, however, are still there in full force, continuing to emerge every spring to carry on their age-old rituals.

To see this fascinating marvel of nature, take the grid road north of Pelly for five kilometres to the sign for Fort Livingstone. Head west for 2.7 km to the historic marker, then continue another 0.2 km past the marker to a clearing between two bushes. Park here and walk north for only a few metres to the riverbank.

The phenomenon is short-lived, usually spanning a couple weeks or so in early to mid-May.

The snakes sometimes emerge sooner or later depending on the weather, so judging by the slow spring this year, we wouldn't be surprised to see them out a bit later. Call the village office in Pelly at 306-595-2124 for updates and to check on road conditions.

Arlene and Robin Karpan are well-travelled writers based in Saskatoon. Contact: travel@producer.com.

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A monument and cairn at the Fort Livingstone historic site mark the North West Mounted Police's first post.