

A photograph of a rattlesnake coiled on the ground in a natural, brushy environment. The snake's body is covered in a pattern of brown and tan spots and bands. The background consists of dry grass, twigs, and some green foliage. A solid red rectangle is visible in the top right corner of the image.

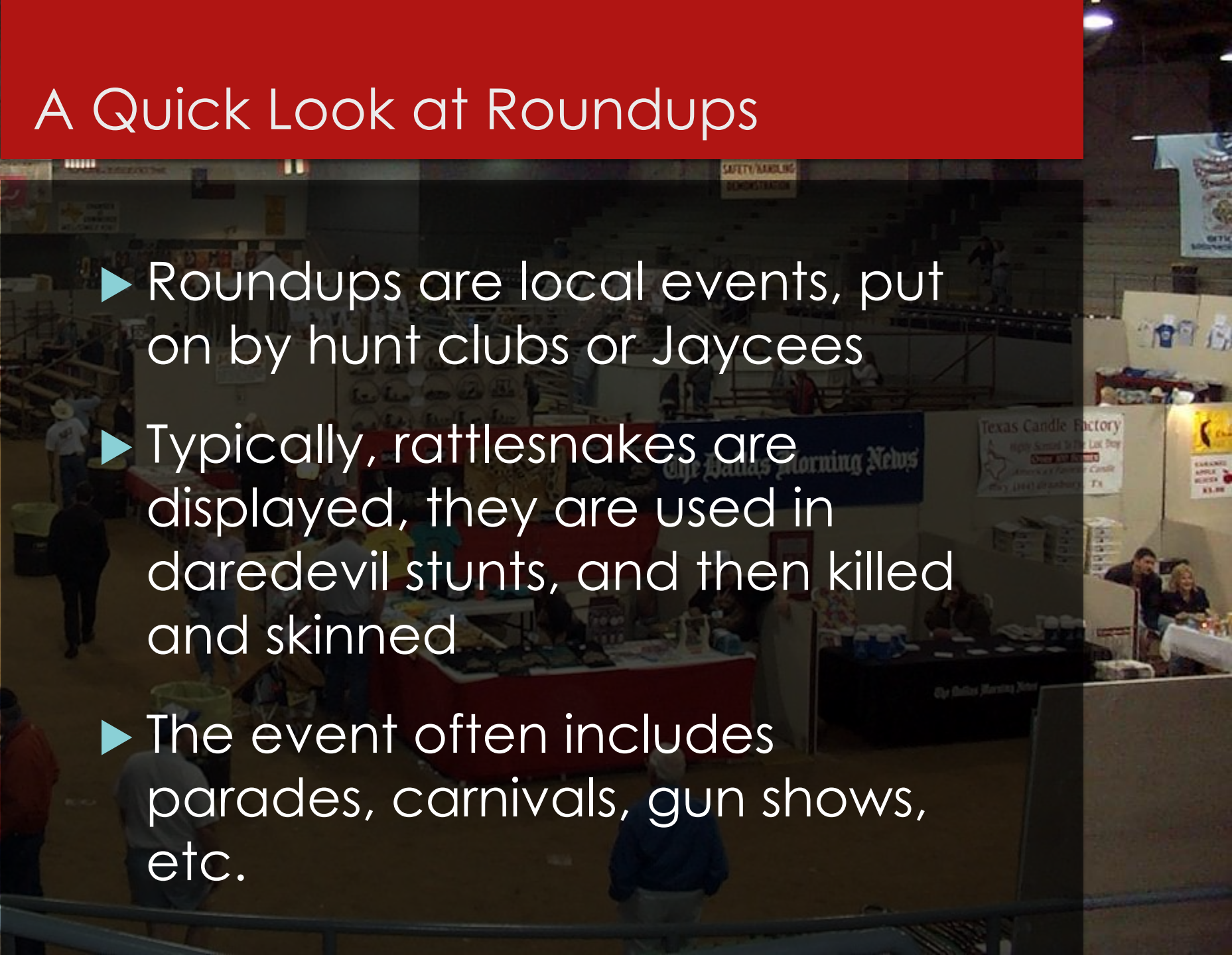
Rattlesnake Roundups

OUR HOPES FOR REFORM OR REGULATION

MICHAEL SMITH, in association with the Rattlesnake Preservation Trust
(with additional photos contributed by others)

A Quick Look at Roundups

- ▶ Roundups are local events, put on by hunt clubs or Jaycees
- ▶ Typically, rattlesnakes are displayed, they are used in daredevil stunts, and then killed and skinned
- ▶ The event often includes parades, carnivals, gun shows, etc.



A Quick Look at Roundups

- ▶ Hunters collect as many rattlesnakes as possible and compete with each other to see how many can be brought to the event
- ▶ The snakes are generally sold by the pound to the roundup or to dealers who sell skins and body parts



2001 Rattlesnake Roundup

Daily Totals	Pounds	Team Totals	Pounds
Friday	1594.0	Bill Westerman	602
Sat.		Cliff Seakers	387
Sun.		Garrett Hoover	318
		Andy Lee	149.5
Total			

The Roundup in Sweetwater, Texas

- ▶ Claims to be the world's largest rattlesnake roundup
- ▶ Still operates in an old traditional style, with destructive ways of collecting, with abuse of snakes and mis-education at the event
- ▶ We think better days could come to Sweetwater, and we will show what we mean at the end of this presentation



Using Gasoline to Collect Snakes



- ▶ A common practice, still used for Sweetwater and some other roundups, is to spray gasoline into crevices, burrows, and rock fissures to force rattlesnakes to the surface at the end of winter

Using Gasoline to Collect Snakes

- ▶ Gasoline poisons the land and water with hazardous & carcinogenic components
- ▶ Spraying affects many species which live in burrows and crevices – burrowing owls, turtles, ground squirrels, amphibians, and others
- ▶ Lab exposure showed toxic effects on various species of animals, with some recovering and others dying

Using Gasoline to Collect Snakes

- ▶ Other states have banned the use of gasoline
- ▶ Texas Parks & Wildlife Department proposed to ban gassing, too
- ▶ Commercial collectors alleged that it would wipe them out
- ▶ Others, including some Texas roundups, said they could continue without using gasoline

Using Gasoline to Collect Snakes

- ▶ The Texas Parks & Wildlife Department's public comments received on the gassing issue:
 - ▶ 10,137 people responded, 38.8% in-state and 54.8% from out of state
 - ▶ 9,312 of them AGREED with the proposed ban on gassing (91.9%)
 - ▶ 80.1% of in-state comments agreed with the proposal
 - ▶ Only 743 disagreed with all or part of the proposal (7.4%)

Using Gasoline to Collect Snakes

- ▶ Despite the clear public support to end gassing, the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department referred the issue to a committee composed of biologists and roundup promoters
- ▶ Predictably, they could not agree, and so the issue was dropped with no action

What Happens to the Snakes?

Exhausted,
poisoned from
the gasoline
used to collect
them, kicked
around, dead
and dying



What Happens to the Snakes?

- ▶ Venom is milked from injured, gasoline-contaminated, dying snakes



What Happens to the Snakes?

- ▶ The snakes traditionally have been used in daredevil stunts
 - ▶ Sacking contests to see how many snakes a participant can pick up and put in a sack in a short time
 - ▶ Getting into sleeping bags with rattlesnakes
 - ▶ Sewing their mouths shut to allow them to be handled

What Happens to the Snakes?

The living snake's mouth is sewn shut so that a visitor can say they've handled a live rattlesnake

(A roundup in Apache, OK)



Photo credit: Kim LaForest

What Happens to the Snakes?

- ▶ One Sweetwater stunt endangered a young lady who was chosen “Miss Snakecharmer.” She was guided to pick up a rattlesnake in a way that likely would have resulted in a bite if the snake was healthy and strong.
- ▶ Note that she picks the snake up a short distance down its neck, not directly behind the jaw line.
- ▶ Inexperienced people should never attempt this, even if done the right way!

A very
dangerous
moment...



What Happens to the Snakes?

- ▶ The snakes are then killed and skinned
- ▶ At Sweetwater in 2001, this involved decapitation with a machete
- ▶ Children are allowed to dip their hands in rattlesnake blood and put their handprints on a wall, a gruesome practice unimaginable with other wildlife
- ▶ (Warning: The next few slides might be disturbing)



I comment that it has been about 10 minutes or more since decapitation, highlighting the long time it takes these snakes, with their slow metabolisms, to finally die



Skinning a rattlesnake in front of what's been called the "wall of shame" where children dip their hands in snake blood and make handprints on the wall

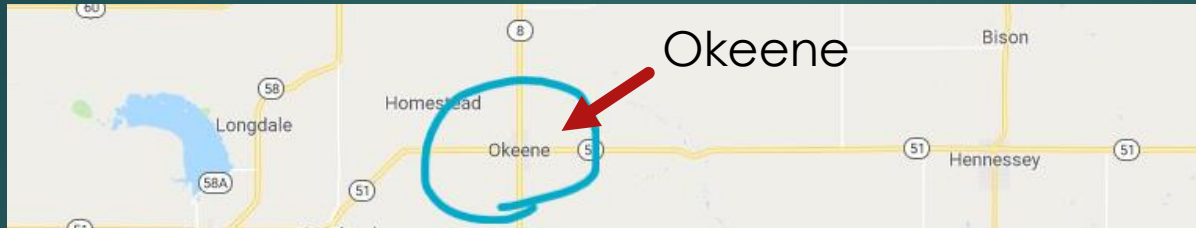


Photo credit:
Dale Burton

Why Do They Do All This?

- ▶ Is it to reduce numbers of a dangerous “pest”?
- ▶ Is it to collect venom for pharmaceutical and research purposes?
- ▶ Is it for the money?
- ▶ Let's see...

Why Have Roundups?



- ▶ Often, promoters claim that the roundup works to reduce the numbers of an animal that is dangerous to humans and livestock.
- ▶ The story is that roundups got started in Okeene, Oklahoma in 1939 to decrease the numbers of snakes and reduce the danger. The roundup there continues today.



Why Have Roundups?

▶ Is it for safety?

- ▶ Every year, there are about 8,000 venomous snakebites in the United States, with roughly 12 deaths.* Compared to other dangers, the risk of snake bite is very low.
- ▶ You are more likely to be killed by a lightning strike or venomous arthropod (such as a spider or wasp) than to be killed by a venomous snake.**

*Juckett & Hancox, *American Family Physician*, 2002

** Price, *Venomous Snakes of Texas*, 2009

Why Have Roundups?

- ▶ Is it for safety?
 - ▶ In 2001 a Jaycee at the Sweetwater Roundup said they don't take all the snakes they find, and ...
 - ▶ ...when they find baby rattlesnakes, they'll let them go, to be "seed snakes." Meaning, to grow up and keep the population going
 - ▶ If the roundup was about decreasing numbers of rattlesnakes, why would they spare the "seed snakes?"

Seed snakes



Why Have Roundups?

- ▶ Is it to collect venom for pharmaceutical and research use?
- ▶ The rattlesnakes have often been collected by spraying gasoline into dens to force them out, and in the process they are poisoned
- ▶ They are often kept in crowded, unsanitary conditions for varying periods of time without food or water
- ▶ By the time they are milked at the roundup, many are at death's door

Processing venom at Sweetwater, 2001

- ▶ A description of how they process venom at Sweetwater, with the claim that it is used for pharmaceutical purposes



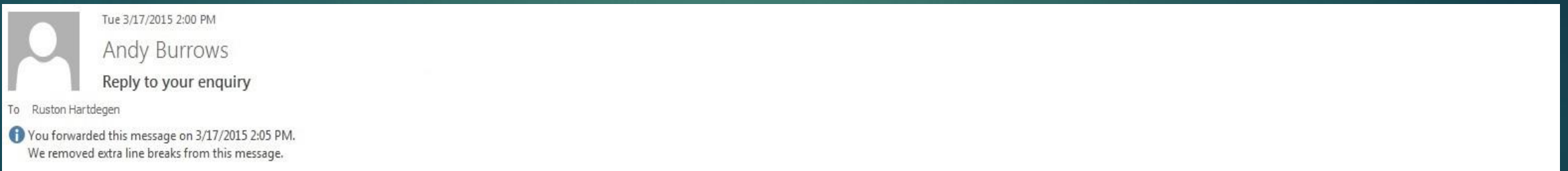
Pharmaceutical Use of Rattlesnake Venom

- ▶ Statement from Jim Harrison and Kristen Wiley at Kentucky Reptile Zoo (a major supplier of venom), 2014:
 - ▶ “...we are completely AGAINST using gasoline (or any chemical) to collect rattlesnakes. ... It is our strong opinion that the use of gasoline is not only unethical and environmentally unsound, it is completely unnecessary from a venom production viewpoint.
 - ▶ “In our experience snakes that have been collected by gas and/or subject to the abusive conditions that exist at roundups are not viable. They are so damaged by the gasoline and the stressful and damaging handling methods that there is no way to keep them alive in captivity.”

Pharmaceutical Use of Rattlesnake Venom

- ▶ BTG is the pharmaceutical company that makes Cro-Fab antivenom (the standard treatment for treating bites from pit-vipers). Here is what they say:

“BTG does not source venom from ‘rattlesnake roundups’.”



Tue 3/17/2015 2:00 PM
Andy Burrows
Reply to your enquiry

To: Ruston Hartdegen

i You forwarded this message on 3/17/2015 2:05 PM.
We removed extra line breaks from this message.

Dear Mr Hartdegen,

I write in reply to you email below. I confirm that BTG does not source venom from "rattlesnake roundups". We produce the vast majority of your own venom. Occasionally we do need to supplement our supplies from third parties, but we only work with reputable suppliers who confirm to us that they do not source from roundups.

I do recall seeing a press article some time ago in which someone who participates in roundups suggested BTG buys venom from them, but I can confirm that is not the case.

Regards,
Andy Burrows
VP, Corporate & Investor Relations

Why Have Roundups?

▶ Is it for the money?

▶ 2001 “Official Program” for Sweetwater says:

- ▶ “Vital to the local economy”
- ▶ Motels, restaurants, gas stations benefit
- ▶ Jaycee proceeds go to local charities

▶ Roundups generate \$6 million annually to Sweetwater (Austin Chronicle)

▶ Sweetwater reported to TPWD: \$40,000/year (maybe this is only gate fees, vs. other income to the community?)


Roundups Involve a Failure of Empathy

- ▶ We think of many animals as “cute.” Social mammals like dogs and wolves have complex facial expressions that convey emotions and intentions
- ▶ People say that society would not tolerate the mass roundup, taunting, poisoning, and killing of things like squirrels or foxes. We have empathy for animals whose feelings and emotional reactions we can read
- ▶ Snakes’s faces do not give us many hints about their internal experience

Rattlesnakes seem to have faces frozen in a sort of scowl, and cannot smile or show us their inner lives in ways we can read on their faces



Timber Rattlesnake



Ironically, recent studies of rattlesnakes are showing that they are complex creatures who interact with each other socially and show maternal protectiveness in the initial weeks of the lives of babies. Like all snakes, they experience pain as well as emotions like fear.

Two Ways to Look at Wildlife

This:

- ▶ Animals are solely for our use and benefit – we have no responsibility to them
- ▶ We are in competition – for us to win, they must lose
- ▶ If they **COULD** hurt us, then they must **WANT** to hurt us
- ▶ Killing something that wants to hurt us shows bravery and protectiveness
- ▶ We cannot empathize with them because they are so different from us, and cruelty is easy

Or this:

- ▶ We have a responsibility to not abuse the natural world
- ▶ Interdependency – what affects one can have some affect on all
- ▶ If we understand their needs and habits, there's little risk of harm
- ▶ An animal can have awareness and experience pain even if it is unlike us
- ▶ When we must kill an animal, it should be done with respect

A Good Model to Follow:

- ▶ Rattlesnake Roundup in Noxen, Pennsylvania
 - ▶ Timber rattlesnakes are brought to the roundup
 - ▶ (from the website) “The snakes are NEVER harmed during this event! Hunters licensed by the Fish and Boat Commission catch, measure, and mark the snakes so that they can be promptly returned safely to the location in which they were originally found.” <http://www.noxenpa.com/snakes.html>
 - ▶ The event is held over several days and benefits the Volunteer Fire Company
 - ▶ It includes music and a parade

Other Good Models to Follow:

- ▶ Two roundups in Georgia have converted to educationally-oriented festivals
 - ▶ Claxton Rattlesnake & Wildlife Festival
 - ▶ Fitzgerald Wild Chicken Festival
- ▶ These events have races, street dances, and other attractions along with animals, to attract numbers of participants that can equal or exceed those that attended old-style roundups

Possible Futures

- ▶ Texas roundups could certainly transition to rattlesnake and wildlife festivals
- ▶ The events could bring money into local communities and offer fun and education, without poisoning the land and teaching cruelty





Please support the Rattlesnake Preservation Trust

and attend Lone Star Rattlesnake Days!

<https://rattlesnakepreservationtrust.org/>

Text and photo/video by Michael Smith, except as noted otherwise

www.livesinnature.com