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Rubber Boa Monitoring in Kootenay National Park

By Larry Halverson, Parks Canada

What lives in Kootenay National Park, likes to stay underground, is active at twilight, can live for more than 50 years, and has rarely been seen by humans?

The Rubber Boa (*Charina bottae*), a secretive snake, is the subject of a new research project of the Parks Canada Agency, assisted by Dr. Robert St. Clair of the University of Alberta. A primary focus of this research is to monitor the snakes' movements in hopes of locating winter hibernacula.

To this purpose, Dr. St. Clair and Sibylla Helms, a University of Victoria co-op student working at Kootenay National Park, recently recruited the aid of two Rubber Boas: the snakes, captured at the Radium Hot Springs pools, were surgically implanted with tiny battery-operated radio transmitters and released.



Rubber Boa receives oxygen and pulse is monitored during implant surgery.
Photo: Larry Halverson

Alan Dibb, Kootenay National Park wildlife specialist, says very little is known about this population's habitat requirements, its range or habitat use patterns. Dibb comments that “the information generated by this research will help to identify and mitigate potential threats to rubber boas here and elsewhere in their range in southeastern British Columbia”. Such threats could include facility development or modification at critical habitat



Transmitter-implanted Rubber Boa is released near Radium Hot Springs in Kootenay National Park.
Photo: Larry Halverson, Parks Canada

sites, highway maintenance or construction activities, and forestry and habitat restoration activities.

“This particular population occurs in an area where there is a fair bit of human activity. So that brings the question up whether we could unknowingly damage something important to the snakes, like their winter hibernacula.” However, Dibb notes that the current facilities at Radium Hot Springs may actually be benefiting the rubber boas. “The snakes appear to be making considerable use of spaces behind the pool's concrete retaining walls and in crevice systems within rock walls built as part of the pool's landscaping.”

Rubber Boas are listed as a species of concern by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife (COSEWIC). They are near the northern limit of their range in Kootenay National Park and live at higher elevations than most Rubber Boa populations.

Funds for this project were provided by the Parks Canada Species at Risk Recovery Action and Education Fund, a program supported by the National Strategy for the Protection of Species at Risk.

For more information visit these websites

http://www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/bc/kootenay/natcul/natcul4_e.asp and

http://www.sararegistry.gc.ca/species/speciesDetails_e.cfm?sid=759