

A Note on the Mortality of Snakes on Highways in Western Kansas

ROBERT E. BUGBEE

Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.*

The death toll of snakes taken by automobiles on our highways every year must be tremendous. Few data have been previously available. For this reason the following account of a short trip by car on May 29, 1943, in western Kansas should be of interest. A total of 260 miles was covered; partly over asphalt and partly over gravel highways. A count of dead snakes was kept, the following table enumerating the species noted.

TABLE I		
Species of snakes found dead on the highway.		
Species	No.	%
Spotted King Snake.....	2	4
Bull Snake	31	54
Milk Snake	1	2
Banded King Snake	1	2
Blue Racer	3	5
Whip Snake	3	5
Miter Snake	1	2
Hognose Snake	1	2
Unidentified	14	24
Total	57	100
No. on gravel	11	19
No. on asphalt	46	81

As the table shows, a total of 57 dead snakes was counted. This number averages one snake for every 4.5 miles traveled. Of the 57 only 11 were counted on the gravel while 46, or 81 per cent of the total, were found on the asphalt. The much greater number on the asphalt may be due to several factors of which one is probably the heavier traffic and the fact that the asphalt warms up during the day and retains heat better than gravel.

The slow, harmless bull snake, that helps to hold in check small rodents on the prairie, made up 54 per cent of all the specimens counted. If, throughout its entire range, the bull snake is slaughtered by cars in the same proportion, some idea of the tremendous death rate can be judged. It should be noted that the trip on which this

Transactions Kansas Academy of Science, Vol. 47, No. 3, 1945.

*Contribution No. 49. Department of Zoology, Fort Hays Kansas State College, Hays, Kansas. The observations here recorded were made while the author was a member of the faculty of the Fort Hays Kansas State College, Hays.

count was made occurred during a period when highway traffic was 30-50 per cent less than in pre-war years.

Very few dead snakes occurred on the highway when it passed between fields under cultivation (winter wheat, canes, etc.) The majority of the dead snakes were counted on the highway between pastures and other uncultivated areas. Many dead snakes were probably missed, especially those that may have been thrown aside or managed to crawl off onto the grass covered shoulder or into the ditch. Such slaughter seems tragic when it is well known that most species of snakes are harmless and help to keep down the rodent and insect populations that would otherwise destroy valuable crops.