

HERPETOLOGY

**Rattlesnake's Age Told By Bone "Growth Rings"**

► THE MOST accurate way to tell a rattlesnake's age is not by the number of rattles on his tail, but by the "growth rings" of his bones, Bayard Brattstrom, University of California at Los Angeles zoologist, finds.

These "growth rings" are much like the annual growth rings seen on a tree's trunk when it is cut horizontally. Each year the rattler deposits a new layer of calcium and other minerals in his bones. These layers can be identified and counted with the aid of a hand lens or low-power microscope.

These "growth rings" occur throughout the snake's skeletal system. Mr. Brattstrom uses a small bone from the head of the snake, in which the rings are more discernible, to determine its age.

This is the only accurate method of determining how old a rattlesnake is, the zoologist points out. Laymen have frequently attempted to tell a rattler's age by its number of rattles. But this is guesswork, he says, and is seldom more accurate than plus or minus a couple of years.

A rattlesnake adds a rattle every time he sheds his skin. This occurs several times a year when he is young. As he grows older, the frequency of shedding tapers off. In older snakes rattles are also often broken off.

Average life expectancy of most rattlers in their native habitat is about 12 to 15 years. Oldest known rattlesnake in captivity is 16.

Science News Letter, August 21, 1954

METEOROLOGY

**We Would Welcome Even Red Snow Now!**

► RED SNOW one day this spring spread dust over the Minneapolis area so thickly that many tons were dropped upon each square mile of territory.

Dr. N. Prokopovich of the Minnesota Geological Survey, ignoring present hot weather, reports a study of the March 12 dust-snow storm in *Science* (Aug. 5).

A minimum of 75,000 tons of red dust fell on the basic Twin City area of 1,500 square miles, Dr. Prokopovich estimated. One sample of snow collected on the University of Minnesota campus showed the equivalent of 128.8 tons per square mile, but the more conservative figure of 50 tons was used in the estimate.

The dust-snow storm occurred after an unusually dry winter and was followed the next day by a fall of usual pure white snow.

The dust was too fine for microscopic examination, but X-ray studies showed that it contained quartz and feldspar. The red color is thought to have been caused by small amounts of iron hydroxide pigment in the dust.

Science News Letter, August 21, 1954

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