

Biologists work to save Quebec's 'most urban' snake as development booms

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The Montreal area's construction boom is threatening to permanently evict Quebec's "most urban" species of snake, according to a biologist working to protect the population in the province.

The brown snake is found in only one place in the province, and that's the Greater Montreal area, according to biologist Pierre-Alexandre Bourgeois.

"Scientists can't find the reason," he said in a phone interview. "The other populations are found in Ontario, Vermont, and New York state. But in between, there are no brown snakes."

Pierre-Alexandre Bourgeois is a biologist at the Ecomuseum.
(zooecomuseum.ca)

Since 2015, Bourgeois and his team at the Ecomuseum Zoo in Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue, Que. have been working to protect and enhance the snakes' habitat, which is increasingly threatened by development.

The snake, which reaches 25 to 35 centimetres in length, thrives in areas with long grass where it feeds mainly on slugs, snails and earthworms.

Unfortunately, those open areas are usually the first to be developed, Bourgeois says.

"We protect the forests first, and of course the wetlands," he said. "But open areas are the ones we tend to destroy more rapidly, and right now there's a very rapid decline."



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While the ideal solution would be to preserve open fields — which are also important to other species such as birds and monarch butterflies — Bourgeois acknowledges that's not always realistic.

So for now, he and his team are focusing on adding some infrastructure to existing conservation areas to make them more hospitable to the reptiles.

They'll use a grant from Hydro-Quebec's environmental foundation to install underground hibernation sites in three nature parks in the Montreal area, as well as adding rocks where the snakes can bask in the sun and hide from predators.

| *'It's a very beautiful and useful species.'* - Pierre-Alexandre Bourgeois

Bourgeois says the Quebec government is evaluating whether the brown snake should be put on the endangered species list.

He says the brown snake's shy nature and habitat make it difficult to count exactly how many are left, but biologists believe the species is already endangered.

Part of the grant money will also go to education, in a bid to help the public understand the importance of preserving a species that isn't fluffy or cute.

Bourgeois says brown snakes aren't venomous and they serve an important role in urban ecosystems by feeding on common garden pests.

In turn, the snakes become prey for other species, including foxes, raccoons and birds of prey.

"Brown snakes are brown, it's not the most charismatic colour," he said. "But if you look closely, it's a very beautiful and useful species."