

Rubber boa, marmots, Partridge Alley restoration, ponderosa pines

February 23rd, 2015



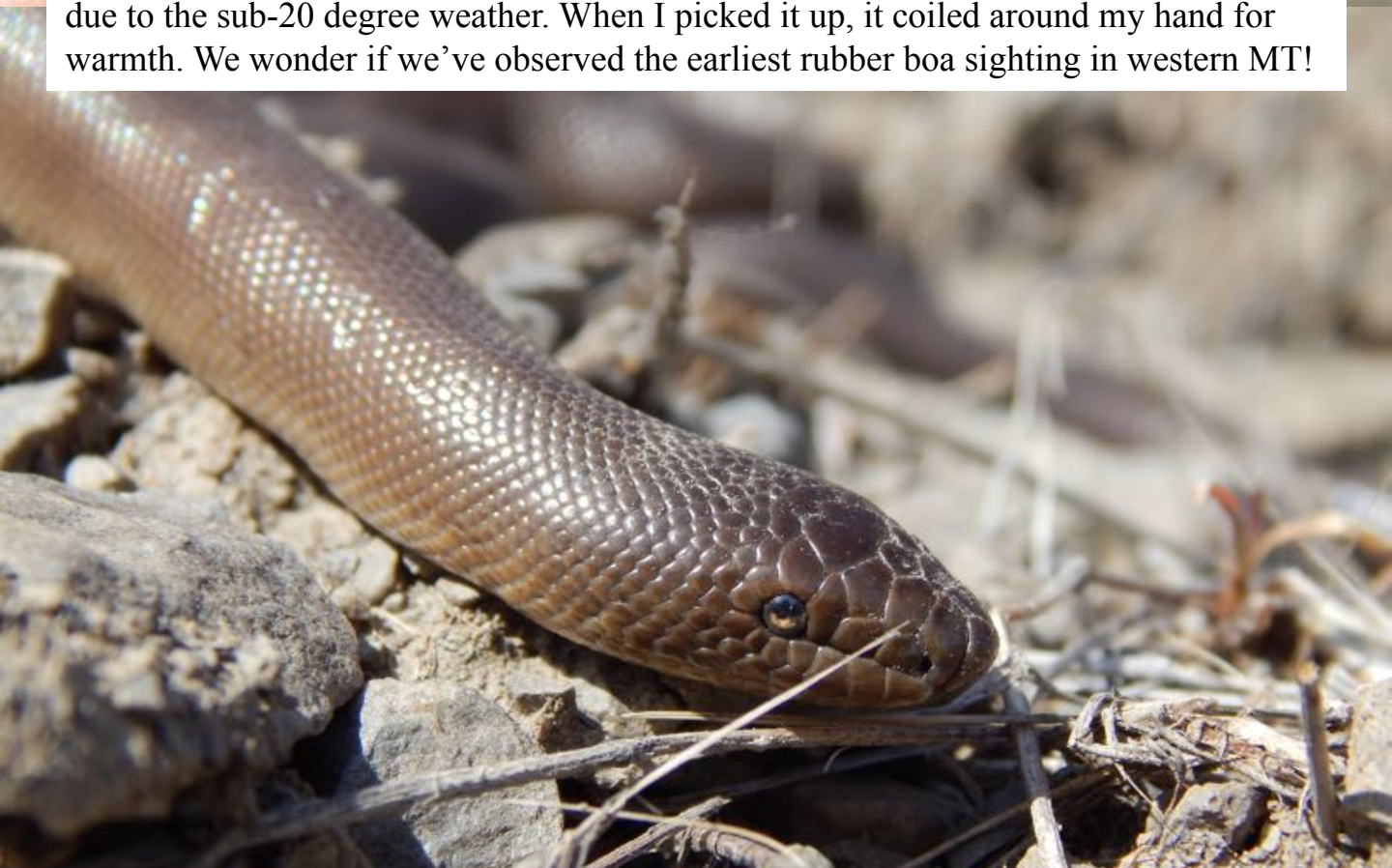
By Jeff Clarke



The unseasonably warm weather woke several mammals from their winter slumber. On February 16th I spotted a pair of marmots sunning themselves on the cliffs along the Bitterroot River. On February 10th I spotted a ground squirrel in Partridge Alley.



On February 23rd I found a rubber boa basking in the sun. Its movements were sluggish due to the sub-20 degree weather. When I picked it up, it coiled around my hand for warmth. We wonder if we've observed the earliest rubber boa sighting in western MT!





Before



After

Over the past three years a large debris pile accumulated in Partridge Alley, made of fence posts, wood stakes, houndstongue, grass clippings, construction material, a chicken coop, and railroad ties. This winter I decided to remove the pile and separate its contents. Future debris will be composted, burned or dispersed in designated areas around the ranch.



Before



After

Several small animals used the massive debris pile. We observed marmots, ground squirrels, cottontails, rock wrens, sparrows, mice, voles and more in and around it. I hope the displaced critters find the more native debris piles we've created elsewhere in the draw.

The remains of this old hunter's camp stand near Baldy summit. It appears that the hunters cut an adjacent barbed wire fence and used the metal to fasten the logs together.



Fresh grouse tracks show the direction in which it flushed when I spooked it.



Every winter more sediment tumbles from the cliffs into the Bitterroot River.





Several ponderosa pines at all elevations have brown-tipped needles. I inspected several of the trees and didn't find evidence of bark beetles. Drought stress or extreme changes in temperature and weather may be to blame; further investigations are needed.

A ground squirrel decided this elk skull was the perfect place to defecate!

