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Snakes on the Loose

Any constrictors, like our black rat snakes, are serpentine Houdinis when it comes to liberating themselves from tanks.

Freshly out of MSU in the late 80s, I had the opportunity to work at Howell Nature Center for a couple of years. I experienced my first snake escape here. A five-foot boa constrictor with a girth of over three inches, had disappeared from its tank. It remained AWOL for over three weeks despite the staff’s daily searches. Ultimately, and appropriately to a good story, it was found by a woman who worked in the kitchen and who was terrified of snakes. One day she went to open the silverware drawer, but it wouldn’t budge beyond a gap of two inches or so. Her decision to investigate the source of the obstruction by squeezing her hand into the slot led to “the scream heard ‘round the nature center.”

The boa incident confirms that, almost no matter how large the snake, it can be maddeningly difficult to find one – especially if it’s had a several hour head-start. Snakes are, by nature, escape artists. The constrictors are the best at it since they can easily muscle-up screen tops that are not properly secured.

Snakes, also by nature, have an affinity to holes and tight places. Not coincidentally, these are doorways to the haunts of the prey they typically pursue. Where ever a mouse can go, a snake is able to follow. If mice can get into a house, snakes can enter via the same routes. Conversely, then, a snake liberated from its tank is capable of eventually finding its way outside. Older houses, like ours, have lots of these small, hidden portals along their foundations.

Yeah, we’ve lost our share of snakes over the years here. It’s hard enough to hang on to one or two much less the thirty or more in our regularly-utilized educational collection. By far, most of the species we lose are, of course, constrictors. The Michigan species are the black rat, Eastern milk, and fox snake. Moreover, and more often than not, a snake that turns up missing is never seen again.

Since our black rat snakes are breeding on a regular basis we’ve got many individuals of all ages and sizes. We view this as our most educationally valuable species due to a combination of features that we cumulatively call “the wow factor.” It’s the state’s largest snake. It’s one of the state’s rarest snakes. It is easy to handle. (It holds on to *you* more than you’re holding on to it.) Then, finally, it has an uber-relaxed disposition. Of all Michigan snakes, let’s call the black rat the perfect serpentine ambassador to the human race. Judging by all the negative attitudes we encounter toward snakes, they desperately *need* ambassadors!

In October we experienced a security breach to the tank that houses the larger rat snakes. Our largest male, a four-year-old, five feet in length, was on the loose. A dragnet through the house included searches behind and under every piece of furniture and major appliance as well as through the myriad hiding places in our old “Michigan” basement. No sign. Since many days were mild through the month, we were aware of the definite possibility that it could find its way outside. Our hopes waned with each passing week. We were left with a single large rat snake. This female - his clutch-mate, and slightly larger - measured a good 18 inches longer than two three-year-olds in our menagerie.

In mid-January, here we go again... One corner of the screen lid was not locked securely. Not until the following day did we notice her absence. Daily searches through the house and basement were futile. We were sick over losing her, however, we knew that she had to remain in the house somewhere as long as winter weather persisted.

In late March, we were scheduled to set-up a full exhibit of our Michigan reptiles and amphibians at Hiawatha Elementary School’s science fair. The opportunity to hold or even “wear” a large black rat snake is always a popular portion of the interactive experience we provide at these events. The three-year-olds are very handle-able, but, being substantially shorter in length, they do not give one the sensation of holding “the largest snake in the state.”

It so happens that the elementary classroom at Stepping Stones Montessori in East Lansing, where I teach as a weekly specialist Michigan natural science instructor, has a five-foot male rat snake as a class pet. It’s another clutch mate of the two we lost. We donated him to the school three years ago when he was much smaller. The class agreed to let us take the snake to use for the science fair. I picked it up the day before the event. It would be nice to have at least one especially large snake to show.

Full exhibits such as this take an entire day of preparation. That morning, our son, Glen, began to gather extension cords and other required accessories. He reached for a plastic crate under the desk in our classroom. It felt heavy, as if something was already in it. When he looked inside he let out a celebratory whoop. The female rat snake was coiled inside. Of course, the crate had been checked and used many times since she had escaped. That evening she was back to work at the science fair, looking and acting no worse for wear after her two-month hiatus.



A dramatization.

A few mornings later, Glen was taking care of much of the routine daily maintenance surrounding the zoo. He slid open the door of a supply cabinet in our lower level to be greeted by another startling fortune. The male rat snake, AWOL for over six months, stared at him from within the cabinet. As many wild constrictors will do, it vibrated its tail to indicate its unease at being approached and picked up. However, it showed no inclination to bite.

We can only speculate that, although it has been a cold March, the more potent rays of the sun against our house stimulated these snakes into activity within the walls. Then, it became a merely matter of looking in the right place at the right time. And just in time for our busiest exhibiting month of the year!

-Jim McGrath

Celebrate Biodiversity with us

EARTH DAY WEEKEND

Birding at Maple River

Saturday, April 20
6am to 12pm

Join our intimate group of only 5 adults on a guided excursion to the Maple River area, north of St. John's, to tally as many birds as possible. Mid-April offers opportunity to view a slew of migrants that have returned north, including a long list of waterfowl species. After birding Maple River, we'll stop at Park Lake on our way back to view more waterfowl. By morning's end we should tally over 50 species! All participants will receive a Michigan Birds checklist on which to keep track of the day's finds. COST: \$35, includes all transportation. If you are located close to our route, arrangements can be made to pick you up on the way. Advance reservations required.



Wood Duck.

Photo © Steve Sage.



Sunday, April 21

1 to 5 pm; \$5 Admission

2pm Presentation

Meet the Grand Slam of Michigan Frogs

Here's a rare opportunity to see live specimens of all 13 species of Michigan frogs! Beautiful Powerpoint images and audio recordings from Nature Discovery's CD, *Frogs of the Great Lakes Region*, enhance this informative presentation traversing visual and audio identification, as well as habitat requirements for each species and discussion of human-induced threats that are imperiling their existence.

Vernal Pond Biodiversity: Did you know that the vernal pond is the most biologically rich natural community that exists in temperate regions like ours? Check out our sample trays on display chock full of life taken from our vernal pond.

Invasive Plants Destroying Our Woodlands: Take a guided walk around our acreage to identify three woodland invaders that are not only killing off native woodland wildflowers, but the very trees that make up the woodland. Participants are welcome to help us remove garlic mustard, Amur honeysuckle and oriental bittersweet.





Catch Nature Discovery on WLNZ Radio's Coffee Break on Earth Day, April 22

Jim is scheduled to appear on Monday, April 22 at 9:15am, discussing invasive plants. The show airs weekdays from 9 to 10am on 89.7 FM. Listen live online at lcc.edu/radio/onair/ or watch it live (or later in the day at 6pm) online at lcc.edu/tv/watch. We'll post a reminder on Facebook.

After-Dark VERNAL POND-WADE

Wednesday, April 24
8 to 10pm



Find out first hand why this dwindling habitat is one of the most biologically-rich on Earth. The evening begins with a twilight walk on the trails. As darkness sets in, we'll gather hand nets, small buckets and flashlights, then wade into the pond while being loudly serenaded by breeding frogs of several species. We'll spotlight them and search for eggs and newly-hatched tadpoles. With hand nets and small buckets, we'll also scoop up a huge array of aquatic invertebrates then take them back to the classroom for closer inspection and identification under bright lights and magnifiers. If the evening is warm enough, we can also watch for glowworms – predatory, dimly-glowing larvae which will eventually become the fireflies of summer. Bring a strong flashlight. Headlamps work best. Wear old shoes, socks and long pants. Bring extra clothes, a towel, and a plastic bag in which to put your wet wading clothes. Boots are not recommended. If the above dates don't work for you, contact us to make a special appointment on another night for your small group. It's a fun and unique outing for scouts and special occasions! We'll offer another wade in the May newsletter. \$12/person. Limited enrollment. Contact us to reserve your spot(s).

U.P. Birding-by-Ear Trip for the Visually Impaired

Do you know a visually-impaired adult who likes to be outdoors? Opportunities Unlimited for the Blind is sponsoring a 5-day trip to the Upper Peninsula, led by Jim, June 3 through 7. The group will stop at a number of sites to and from our ultimate destination, a house on Otter Lake, near Munising. The price is only \$125 per person. Scholarships may be available. For more details email OUB Field Services Director, Donna Posont, at donnabutterfly50@gmail.com or phone her at 313-220-8140.

Summer Day Camp Schedule

We're taking enrollment now for this summer's day camps. Visit our website or click this link for enrollment information and other details:

<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/summercamps.pdf>

Around the State in April

- ❖ Thursday, April 11: 6-7:30pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Fairview Elementary School Science Expo, Lansing. Public is welcome.
- ❖ Friday, April 12: 3-6pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Benzonia Conservation District Water Festival, Benzonia Central High School. Public is welcome.
- ❖ Saturday, April 13: 10am-3pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; University of Michigan, Flint. Public is welcome.
- ❖ 10am-3pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Embrace Our Earth Festival, Laker High School, Pigeon. Public is welcome.
- ❖ Thursday, April 18 : 9am-2pm. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; MDEQ Earth Day Celebration. Reservations required.
- ❖ Tuesday, April 23: 7pm. MI Turtles presentation; Saginaw Audubon Society, Green Point Nature Center. Public is welcome.
- ❖ Saturday, April 27: 9:30-11:30am. MI Reptiles & Amphibians Exhibit; Cannon Township Waterfest, Cannonsburg. Public is welcome.



Climate Change Realist

Here is another link to the latest in *USA Today's Weathering the Change* series of reports. In addition to the report itself, an accompanying video explains how increased carbon in the atmosphere is making ocean water more acidic. A second video explains how the more acidic ocean environment is killing coral reefs and oyster beds.

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/03/27/climate-change-seas/2024759/>

AQUARIUMS WANTED!

We need aquariums, especially 5, 10, 15 and 20 gallon tanks. If you have one or more taking up room in your garage or basement, please consider donating it to Nature Discovery. We'll try to arrange to pick it up at your door. Contact us today!

Become a fan of *Nature Discovery* on Facebook!

Check out our Youtube channel, *Wild Williamston*, too!

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