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### Snakes, Other Reptiles Get Their Due At Herpetological Society Gathering

Posted: October 24, 2011  
By NATE DELESLINE III

BRIDGEWATER — About 50 people gathered on Saturday to enjoy the company of familiar faces, new acquaintances — and snakes. Lots of snakes. Not to mention a fair number of other reptiles, too.

Coiled comfortably on beds of sand and bark behind glass in a Bridgewater College science lab, most of the reptiles seemed unaware of the interest and adoration expressed by members of the Virginia Herpetological Society.

Organized in 1958, the society's mission is to bring experts, hobbyists and the public together to advance the appreciation and study of the state's native reptiles and amphibians. Members include reptile experts, university professors and hobbyists from all regions of Virginia.

"It's really cool because over the last eight years, we've just been all over the state," said society president Kory Steele, who was accompanied by his wife, Emily. "We've driven nine hours — we're from Newport News — so we've driven from there to southwest Virginia on the Kentucky border."

#### Undeserved Reputation

Virginia is home to about 60 species of salamanders, 35 kinds of snakes and 25 types of turtles, according to the society. However, only three Virginia snakes — the copperhead, the timber rattler and the cottonmouth — are venomous.

Gavin Lawson, a professor of biology at Bridgewater College, said Valley residents are most likely to encounter harmless black racers, rat snakes or garter snakes, but seeing a copperhead or rattler isn't out of the question.



Larry Mendoza, vice president of the Virginia Herpetological Society, shows off a common garter snake during the society's symposium at Bridgewater College on Saturday. Mendoza also displayed several venomous snakes, including the smooth-scaled death adder. (Photos by Michael Reilly / DN-R)



An albino monacled cobra seems to peer out at the crowd from his cage at BC's science lab on Saturday.

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Larry Mendoza, the society's vice president, also featured some of the more exotic venomous snakes from his personal collection, like the sidewinder rattlesnake, which is native to the southwestern U.S., an albino monocaed cobra, and the ominous sounding smooth-scaled death adder.

Steele's interest in reptiles was piqued while he was in college. He eventually landed a job at the Virginia Living Museum in Newport News and later, as head of the VHS. Saturday's annual gathering served as both a business meeting and a forum to share research and fellowship.

Lawson also helped organize the event. He acknowledged that it's tough to garner sympathy and appreciation for reptiles because they arouse such disdain in many people. He praised events like the society's gatherings for providing non-threatening opportunities to learn more about the natural world.

'Accessible' To All

University of Virginia professor Edmond Brodie was the event's key speaker. Other presenters included Lawson and J.D. Kleopfer of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.

Jeff Dragon, a George Mason University graduate student, was among those attending to hear updates and the latest research from the experts. He's studying the environment and the life and habitat of wood turtles, another native species. Dragon, who said he's had a lifetime interest in reptiles and amphibians, wants to work to build respect, protection and appreciation for all animals and their natural habitats.

Steele echoed that sentiment.

"We try to make sure we're accessible to everyone," he said. "We also make sure that people who just have a fleeting knowledge [of reptiles] have a chance to get in and get a little more interested."

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